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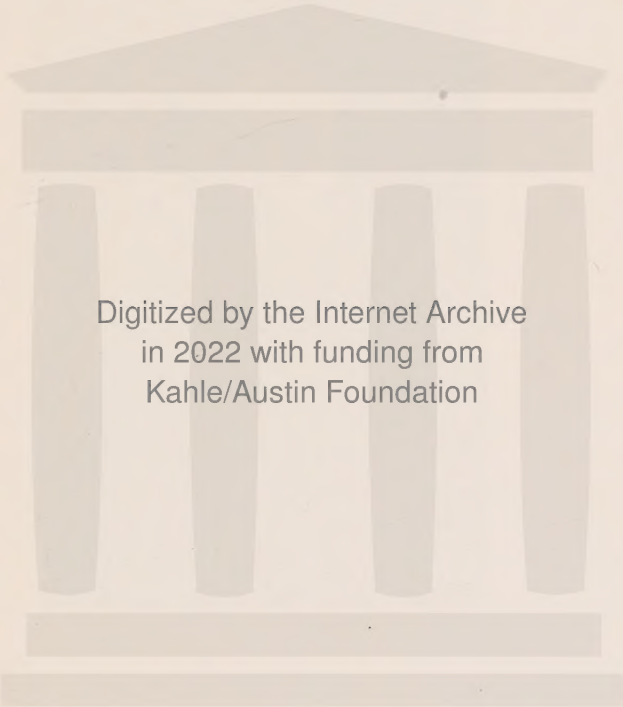




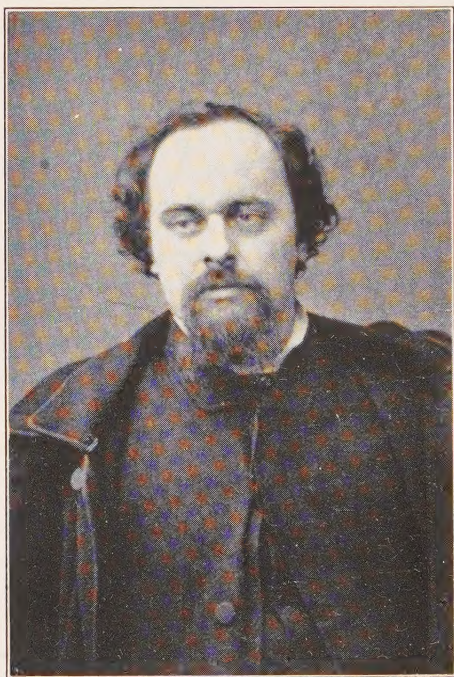
# THE HOUSE OF LIFE

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# THE HOUSE OF LIFE

## *A SONNET-SEQUENCE*

BY

DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI

*WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES*

By PAULL FRANKLIN BAUM



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*The record of a strange and fascinating  
nature and the outpouring of a dual life  
that will surely have an interest and  
delight for posterity.*—WILLIAM SHARP





## PREFACE

**I**N certain respects the point of view here taken with regard to "The House of Life" as a whole and certain sonnets in particular differs from the usual view; and it may seem not always supported by genuine "chapter and verse" evidence. If this is so, I simply admit the objection without defence. What is offered in the following pages must be read as exposition, not argument.

Two matters which might appear proper in such an edition I have left untouched. One is the search for parallel passages, either in Rossetti or in earlier poets (an omission which I do not regret); the other is a complete apparatus of variant readings from the Rossetti manuscripts and proof-sheets in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. This latter I have had to forego, since the curator is unwilling to sanction the publication of the variant readings. I have followed the text of the *Collected Works*, edited by William Michael Rossetti, 1886, and have recorded the significant variants between that and the 1870 edition. The *Bibliographical List* is obviously not intended to be complete; it may be supplemented by references in the *Introduction* and the *Notes*, and

(for Rossetti) by William Michael's "Bibliography," London, 1905.

I am indebted to Mr. Frederick Page, of the Oxford University Press, for his kindness in showing me his notes on "The House of Life," and for his generous permission to use some details from them in my Notes.

P. F. B.

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# THE HOUSE OF LIFE



# INTRODUCTION

## I. PRELIMINARY

THE following attempt is one of pioneering, and I hope not one of supererogation. Complaints of the "difficulty" and "obscurity" of the sonnets of "The House of Life" are frequent enough, and there need be no apology for trying to elucidate them; but many persons seem to have a horror of the pedagogical habit of explaining poetry, and on this score some apology — or explanation — is perhaps needed. Some poetry, no doubt, produces its most "poetical" effect by a kind of divine vagueness, by a method of indirection, and in so far as this is true, it is profanation to push one's analysis beyond a certain point. "A poetical phrase of this kind," says William Michael Rossetti apropos of his brother's phrase, "death's sterility," "should not be scrutinized with prosaic and tiresome precision."<sup>1</sup> True. Nevertheless it has been the custom of poets from time immemorial to have something to say to the intelligence of the reader as well as to his emotions; and for reasons which will appear in a moment, Rossetti often disguised his meaning under a cloud of gorgeous phrasing. Yet the meaning is there, if one choose to disengage it; and if it is profanation to analyze, is it not also profanation to imply that the poem is not worth analysis? Pater's famous dictum that the other arts are constantly striving toward the condition of music, in the sense that they seek a perfect solution of form and content, is of course true, but it need not mean (as it *might* mean) that the

<sup>1</sup> *R. D. W.*, p. 217 n.

components of this highest blending cannot be distinguished and separated for purposes of a more complete understanding. Music is, as everyone knows, a peculiarly dangerous art to rely on for illustration. A Damoclean *ignotum per ignotius* hangs over all such uses, and the problem is mystified rather than clarified when one reflects that very few persons know what they are experiencing "in the presence of" (as critics say) a piece of music. This fascinating question, however, I will not undertake to discuss now. Let it be enough to recall that poets habitually include meaning with their music, and at the same time admit that we may do well to recognize that there is a "certain point" beyond which it is folly to push one's analysis. There is a kind of quintessential poetry which defies scientific examination. Granted; but this is not often Rossetti's kind. It is Shakespeare's sometimes, and there are familiar passages in Keats and Shelley. For the rest, beside the danger of over-subtlety in analysis, there is the danger of mistaking vagueness for a virtue, of confusing imperfect expression with music.

William Michael Rossetti in defending his "Dante Gabriel Rossetti as Designer and Writer," has put the matter pretty plainly:

I added to the volume a literal prose-version or amplification of the sonnet-sequence *The House of Life* for the benefit of those (and I have known more than one, especially Madox Brown) who opined that the sonnets themselves are not easy to be understood. That is an opinion in which I myself do not distinctly agree: I find that most of the sonnets are plain enough, and that others, not equally perspicuous, are accessible to a sympathetic mind, are not hazier than other literature of a like order, and are in no grave need of a commentator. Still, as some people *will* have it that the series is obscure, I

thought it a good turn to them and to the author to make them less obscure, however prosaic the process of doing so. My brother himself, as I am well aware, had not the least wish to be obscure. To himself, his thoughts, whether in these sonnets or in his other poems, were always clear and compacted; and he took a large amount of pains to keep the diction free from huddle or ambiguity. His conceptions may have been sometimes subtle and rarefied — if ever they became nebulous, that was quite against his will; in style he aimed at elevation, not at inflation.<sup>1</sup>

Here, it might seem, is a very lion in the path. But one must sometimes venture boldly. Nor can it be denied that William Michael's paraphrases (I have used them freely in my Notes because they are frequently of great value, and because the volume has long been out of print) leave much to be desired. Afraid, as he is, of "prosaic and tiresome precision," he leaves unscrutinized many a passage that prosaic and tiresome people (such as careful readers and all who wish to find the author's thought as well as his feeling) are seriously troubled by. Accordingly, for those who may care to read and study "The House of Life" intensively, I submit the interpretations that follow in the Notes. I trust I have not invented difficulties where they do not exist; nor have I tried to explain everything. Moreover, my interpretations are, of course, not to be taken, so far as they go, as final. Far from it: they are one reader's attempt, and often only guesses. Where they, sometimes, differ from William Michael's, which have the fraternal authority behind them, the candid reader will choose. William Michael, hampered by a feeling of reticence and decorum, has withheld several significant features of the

<sup>1</sup> *Some Reminiscences of William Michael Rossetti*, New York, 1906, ii, 478-479.

Rossetti biography and some of these are valuable as illuminating "The House of Life."

Professor Tisdell poses the rhetorical question: "Has the inner life of the poet never been quite understood?" No inner life is ever quite understood; and Rossetti's, perhaps, least of all, in view of the protective silence with which Rossetti's friends have shrouded certain facts of his life. On the other hand, Marillier took an honest view, albeit over-pessimistic. "Let us be frank," he says, "and not try to understand Rossetti. He probably did not fully understand himself." This is needlessly passivistic, and bears within itself the germs of a too melancholy resignation. Rather must we stagger onward — hopefully and courageously — toward the far unreachable goal!

In criticism there is, to be sure, no biographical imperative. But with Rossetti's "House of Life" there are some grounds for pursuing biography. Each sonnet is "a moment's monument"; or, in prose, Rossetti declared to Scott that he hardly ever wrote a sonnet "except on some basis of special momentary emotion."<sup>1</sup> If we knew Rossetti's life in sufficient detail, we might hope to find and cite chapter and verse for each of these moments; though it is doubtful if this would be desirable. But in the paucity of our knowledge this search is vain, and perhaps under even ideal conditions would be fruitless. The artist is never the mere autobiographer; many of his finest moments are the product of his "projecting" imagination, and leave the quotidian events of life irrecoverably behind.

Thus we are faced with an antinomy which demands compromise in lieu of reconciliation. By carefully and

<sup>1</sup> William Bell Scott, *Autobiographical Notes*, London, 1892, ii, 150.

cautiously applying the known facts to the given *momenta* of "The House of Life," we may at least achieve a fuller comprehension of the meaning of some of the individual sonnets and of the whole series. This process is methodically sound; where it breaks down, the fault will be one of imperfect knowledge or imperfect application.

## II. ROSSETTI'S METHOD OF COMPOSITION

Rossetti's methods of composition must be blamed for some share in the difficulty and obscurity of the sonnets. Said the poet himself:

I am the reverse of Swinburne. For his method of production inspiration is indeed the word. With me the case is different. I lie on the couch, the racked and tortured medium, never permitted an instant's surcease of agony until the thing on hand is finished.<sup>1</sup>

For 19 September, 1869 — and it will be borne in mind that three-fourths of the whole sequence was composed after 1868 — William Michael Rossetti entered in his diary:

S[winburne] objects much to Gabriel's continual revising of his old poems, and thinks indeed that G[abriel]'s whole system of verse-writing is becoming now somewhat over-elaborate. His beautiful Angora cat, given him by Mazzini — white with a tabby tail — died lately. It used to sit on his head while he was writing.<sup>2</sup>

This is unpromising enough; but William Michael tells us this also, in the same year:

His practice with poetry is first to write the thing in the rough, and then to turn over dictionaries of rhyme and synonyms so as to bring the poem into the most perfect form.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in A. C. Benson, *Rossetti*, p. 74.

<sup>2</sup> *Rossetti Papers*, p. 407.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 27 May, 1869, p. 393.



One would scarcely expect poems written under such circumstances of laborious filing to be simple, perspicuous, and direct. Add to this Rossetti's love of conciseness and the result is bound to be as one finds it: too often "somewhat over-elaborate."<sup>1</sup> It is not, of course, that poets do not file and polish and thus improve their verses, but that Rossetti's excessive addiction to revising, together with his complicated system of composition, tended to obscure the original design.

Buchanan pretended that "The House of Life" owed much to the "Sonnets from the Portuguese." But beyond some talk of Love and Death (quite dissimilarly understood), I find nothing in common between the two sequences. One of the most marked qualities of the "Sonnets from the Portuguese" is their eager pulsation of feeling and of language, the language leaning, as it were, toward incoherence because the poet would say everything at once; whereas the spirit of "The House of Life" is one of restrainedness and deliberation, whatever incoherence there may be, coming not from eagerness of expression, but from elaborate and involved condensedness. Many of Rossetti's sonnets seem cramped for room, as if he had planned a large poem in which various divisions and subdivisions would have their proper place and space, then had gradually compressed the material until the original outlines became confused, ideas being forced together that were meant to stand apart. And finally, after he has reduced it all to the hundred and fifty words or so of a sonnet, it is necessary for us to expand the poem to its former dimensions before we can understand it.

The contrast between this method of composing and

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Mr. Osbert Burdett's remark quoted below, p. 13, n. 1.

Rossetti's acknowledged attitude to his reader is more striking than real.

Above all ideal personalities with which the poet must learn to identify himself, there is one supremely real, which is the most imperative of all; namely, that of his reader. And the practical watchfulness needed for such assimilation is as much a gift and instinct as is the creative grasp of alien character. It is a spiritual contact hardly conscious, yet ever renewed, and which must be a part of the very act of production.<sup>1</sup>

This, I take it, is an ideal view, but it is also Rossetti's. Purpose and practice must in his case be harmonized by assuming that Rossetti, with the rack and throe of composition, was forced by the very fulness of his matter, combined with his eagerness for concision and the strict exigencies of the sonnet form, to sacrifice something of clarity to the love of elaborated beauty. Not always, of course, but in those sonnets which give us the most trouble. The poet and his reader together pay the price. But Rossetti would hardly regard the reader as worth his consideration who was unwilling to bear some reasonable part in the aesthetic act. The theory of communication — how and whereby the poet conveys both thought and feeling to his reader — implies virtue in the recipient as well as in the agent; and the old saying holds: that we "get out" of any enjoyment a result proportionate to what we "put in."

### III. SOME CHARACTERISTICS

I do not intend here to assay the whole of Rossetti's poetic work; yet "The House of Life" exhibits nearly all of his poetic qualities with the important exception

<sup>1</sup> Quoted from Rossetti in William Sharp, p. 406.

of his narrative power, in the ballads, with their quasi-archaisms and refrains, and of what is vaguely called his mediaevalism. It may seem perverse to hold, in the face of "The Blessed Damozel" and "The Stream's Secret," and similar poems, and especially the sonnets, that Rossetti was not primarily a lyric poet. In all but form, however, his best poetry is rather dramatic than lyric. Even when he is working from personal subjects, the "crises" of his own experience, he dramatizes as it were instinctively. He projects and objectifies; he does not sing of himself directly, but of a self seen as from a distance and "set" into a background. This is partly a result of his deliberate method of composition, the opposite of impulsive outpourings of emotion, the reflection and "brain-work." So that even his short poems are dramatic impersonal lyrics, and rarely "songs."

On the formal side, Rossetti's technique has little of mystery in it. His effects, precisely because they are for the most part conscious, are obvious — in no unfavorable sense — and being so, need little more than mention. The sonnet, with its difficulties and its pitfalls, seems a natural mode with him. He handles it with ease and with little appearance of awkward restraint. Sometimes his desire for compactness produces crowding, sometimes his subject may seem to us not quite of "sonnet size." Rather than force himself to pad or dilute, he adopts one or another of the many licenses permitted to sonneteers, such as running the content of the octave over into the sestet or adding a third rime in the octave. Occasionally he experiments, as in the irregular sonnets LI and LXXXIII, and even repeats an octave rime in the sestet. Frequently (in about one fifth of the "House of Life" sonnets) he uses the couplet ending

usually regarded as belonging to the English or Shakespearean sonnet.<sup>1</sup> But all these are the liberties of a master; and one may yield him with almost equal security the tribute Sir William Watson pays to Milton as a sonnet-writer (perhaps substituting "Queen's" for "King's")—

A hundred Poets bend proud necks to bear  
This yoke, this bondage. He alone could don  
His badges of subjection with the air  
Of one who puts a King's regalia on.

And quite as much as Milton, — and more, I think, than Wordsworth or Mrs. Browning, — he has given the sonnet his own peculiar music.

Rossetti's rimes are somewhat notorious. It used to be said that his ear was too easily satisfied. To be sure, he allowed himself very liberally the familiar and customary approximate rimes, such as *long: among*, or *this: his*, and a great many more; and forced the conventional accentuation in *always* and similar compounds; these might be tolerated, they belong to the "debateable borders" of prosodic decorum. But when he outraged the dictionary with rimes like *hers: feathers*, *kiss: suit-service* (a word as odd as the rime), *be: sanctuary*, and certain others, there were some who felt that hanging was too good for such a wrencher of accents. Yet it may be doubted if these and nearly all their kind are not a simple device for obtaining variety and escape from hackneyed practice, rather than a weak yielding to intractable matter. Occasionally, as in the rimes to *love*, Rossetti may have felt it necessary to bow before a native deficiency of the English language; and at other times the sonnet-yoke may have reconciled his con-

<sup>1</sup> On this and similar prosodic matters, see Appendix II.

science to slight imperfections of sound; but, on the whole, his variations should be regarded as deliberate, and judged, if one must judge, as errors of taste — (*non disputandum!*) — not as serious flaws of technique.

Rossetti is fond of long, resonant phrases often ending with a monosyllable:

As instantaneous penetrating sense (v)

As the cloud-foaming firmamental blue (xii)

Blazed with momentous memorable fire (Lxii)

Their refuse maidenhood abominable (Lxxxv)

Of ultimate things unuttered the frail screen. (xcvii)

He knows the value of monosyllables with spondaic effect: "Frost-bound fire-girt scenes" (LXXXI); and of the 110 words (reckoning hyphenated compounds as two words) of this sonnet, 89 are monosyllables.<sup>1</sup> He contrasts a two-beat line with a six-beat line:

How passionately and irretrievably,

In what fond flight, how many ways and days! (Lxxvii)

He varies the normal rhythm:

Being of its furthest fires oracular. (xxvii)

He plays tricks: "the lifted shifted steeps" (LXXIX); and

Fire within fire, desire in deity. (vi)

There is a riot of such prankishness in LI. He alliterates freely —

Leaves us for light the halo of his hair (ii)

Thy mastering music walks the sunlit sea (ix)

and often more subtly than this, as in XXXIX. He tries a counterpoint in XIII (see Notes), and similarly in XXI:

<sup>1</sup> In the following sonnet, 106 of the whole 123 words are monosyllables.

Her glances' sweet recall Of love;  
her murmuring sighs memorial.

He varies the pauses easily: for example, in XX, line 2 after the fifth syllable, line 4 after the third and fifth, line 5 after the seventh, line 6 after the fourth; together with slight pauses or none at the end of lines 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 10, 12, and 13.

Such observations and statistical details can, of course, be multiplied indefinitely — to little purpose. Those who read the sonnets with an ear to their music know them at once and find them everywhere; and it were otiose to seek to prove by examples that Rossetti is master of the five-stress line singly and in concerted groups, that he has the sonnet-form in perfect control, and so on.<sup>1</sup> In all "The House of Life" is "music's visible tone" with "cadence deep and clear," sonorous or subtle as suits the meaning; we have only to listen, and then is

his song  
Still loudlier trilled through leaves more deeply stirred.

But not in sound alone consist Rossetti's "gorgeous word-textures, strange tapestries of language." Sound and sense blend into poetry of abundant power to "spring the imagination":

And Life, still wreathing flowers for Death to wear (i)  
upon Life's darkening slope  
The ground-whirl of the perished leaves of Hope,  
The wind of Death's imperishable wing (iv)

---

<sup>1</sup> For a dissident opinion one may note Mr. Osbert Burdett's comment on "the complicated movement of Rossetti's verse, which may be compared to that of a dreamer stirring in a troubled sleep." *The Beardsley Period*, New York, 1925, p. 33.



Follow the desultory feet of Death (LXV)

Sleepless with cold commemorative eyes (xcvii)

to cite only a few instances; any reader will find others of his own choice. In Bagehot's well-known classification of poetry as pure, ornate, and grotesque, Rossetti will probably be placed in the second category. His richness often, in the judgment of many, tends toward sumptuousness and a heavy atmosphere overladen with dark perfumes which become oppressive, an atmosphere of "dreams and the brooding imagery of the senses." To this I shall return later. Yet there are lines in "The House of Life" of pure beauty:

Is like a hand laid softly on the soul (xxvi)

Even as the beads of a told rosary! (xxiv)

As laurelled Orpheus longed for when he wooed  
The half-drawn hungering face with that last lay (vi)

On these debateable borders of the year

Spring's foot half falters; scarce she yet may know

The leafless blackthorn-blossom from the snow;

And through her bowers the wind's way still is clear. (xiv)

From these one descends through bold and perhaps successful images, such as "my life unleaved" (XXV), "the flashing jewel of thy heart" (XXXV), and

As the cloud-foaming firmamental blue

Rests on the blue line of a foamless sea, (xii)

to those affectations and conceits which mar so many of the sonnets: "moonclouds," "Queen Dian," "queen-dom," "the deep-bowered dove," "an osier-odoured stream," "brink of ban," "Death's nuptial change," "seizure of malign vicissitude," "the fingerpoints look through [the grass] like rosy blooms," and such play-

fulness as "long stirred the longing ache." The number of these lapses is very considerable in "The House of Life." They are of course a "matter of taste," and not all of them will be equally offensive to all readers. Remembering that Rossetti was (as his brother puts it) "a very fastidious writer" and always revising, we must recognize that these flaws are inherent in his poetic temperament. They are not a youthful error which he outgrew, but rather a concomitant of his love of ornateness. They have a kind of counterpart in the precious detail with which he nearly always crowded the background of his pictures. "He abhorred anything straggling, slipshod, profuse, or uncondensed," says his brother; so that, if we are to take this literally, we can reconcile it with the sonnets only by supposing that Rossetti did not consider these flaws as flaws at all, but as beauties. In short, they are not to be explained away; they are facts, part of the evidence.

Notwithstanding, a guess may be ventured to account for their existence. The analogy of painting will account for a certain few — the picturesque accuracy of the painter's eye resulting in an excess of realism or vividness.<sup>1</sup> A confessed zeal for striking novelty will also account for many. "I must say that more special

<sup>1</sup> It is usual to comment on the comparative absence of natural imagery in Rossetti's poetry, especially the earlier verse. This is partly a matter of Rossetti's subjects and partly also of temperament or quality of mind. Even his pictures are often abstract instead of pictorial. He had none of the Wordsworthian passion for the "divine" in nature: "He is good, you know, but unbearable," said Rossetti of W. W. But when he chose Rossetti could paint nature in color (e. g. the first three stanzas of "Sunset Wings"), or etch it in clear hard lines (e. g. the third stanza of "Even So"). I do not stress here the picture element in Rossetti's poetry because I find very little of it in "The House of Life."



originality and even *newness* (though this might be called a vulgarizing word), of thought and picture in individual lines . . . seems to me the very first qualification of a sonnet.”<sup>1</sup> But probably the true explanation of these conceitistic blemishes lies in Rossetti’s early study of Dante and the poets of the *dolce stil nuovo*, together with a native temperamental sympathy with that kind of writing. One may call it mediaevalism if one will. Certainly a similarity of tone and feeling with the early Italian poets and Dante and his circle, whom Rossetti translated so well, is noticeable in many of his first sonnets and some of the later ones; and though exact parallels are hard to find, the influence is clear.<sup>2</sup>

A great deal of Rossetti’s work in both arts is characterized by a remarkable “definiteness of sensible imagery.” This trait has various antecedents, the most obvious of which, for poetry, is the painter’s habit of visualizing details:

She had three lilies in her hand,  
And the stars in her hair were seven,

because, forsooth, it is scarcely possible for the painter to depict an uncertain number of lilies or stars; though the same cannot reasonably be urged for the following lines:

At ilka tett of her horse’s mane  
Hung fifty silver bells and nine,

---

<sup>1</sup> Rossetti to Hall Caine, *Recollections*, pp. 110-111.

<sup>2</sup> In view of Rossetti’s prodigious memory and the quantities of verse (Tennyson, Browning, Henry Taylor, Landor — and Chaucer and Spenser, says Stephens) that he knew by heart, it is surprising how few echoes his poetry contains. Doubtless many exist (Horn for example has made out *The Blessed Damozel* as a sort of cento from the *Divine Comedy*), but I have not sought for them. As probably Danteque one might note IV, 1, 2; XVI, 4, 5; XXIII, XXIX, etc., and much of the talk of (personified) Love.

which are from the old ballad of "Thomas Rymer,"<sup>1</sup> and Rossetti was well read in the ballads. Implied in this definiteness of imagery is, of course, one of the fundamental Pre-Raphaelite principles, that of painting careful minute detail for the detail's sake. But both of these traits are the reflex of a natural tendency of Rossetti's mind. "His imaginative conceptions came to him, as I know," says Watts-Dunton, "in actual pictures which he afterwards translated into words."<sup>2</sup> How far Rossetti was willing to go in this direction of literalness, even to a kind of "insanity of realism," allowing a fine quality to become a defect, may be seen in the first two and fifth and sixth lines of this stanza from "Song and Music":<sup>3</sup>

O leave your hand where it lies cool  
 Upon the eyes whose lids are hot:  
 Its rosy shade is bountiful  
 Of silence, and assuages thought.  
 O lay your lips against your hand  
 And let me feel your breath through it,  
 While through the sense your song shall fit  
 The soul to understand.

Yet such passages are not frequent in "The House of Life." In the sonnets his images are more commonly "literary" or "abstract" pictures at one or two removes from the actual or an imaginative fusion of different elements:

<sup>1</sup> Child, no. 37. If in this and in other ballads there are bits which remind one of Keats and Rossetti, it is perhaps better to recognize "parallels" than to assume "influences."

<sup>2</sup> "The Truth about Rossetti," in *Nineteenth Century*, XIII (1883), 404 ff., p. 408.

<sup>3</sup> Collected Works, i, 253. But even here one should note how the "realism" is, as it were, *applied* in the last two lines.

Since this day's sun of rapture filled the west  
And the light sweetened as the fire took leave? (xxx)

A glance like water brimming with the sky  
Or hyacinth-light when forest-shadows fall. (xxxi)

One of the simplest forms of imagery, one of the simplest devices for the symbolic suggestion of one thing or idea by another, is the poetic figure of personification. This Rossetti employs in a variety of aspects, from the chilly abstract to the concretely vivid. Yet even the former sort, that stock-in-trade of the eighteenth century, he seems to endow with life, just as Keats had done before him, by the poetic setting which he gives it. The error of the eighteenth century had been to rely on personification to "elevate" prose into "beauty"; with Keats and Rossetti the figure is already a part of the beauty. Compare his *Hope*, *Fame*, *Oblivion*, *Youth*, and *Death* in the first sonnet ("Love Enthroned") and Keats's "Ode on Melancholy":

She dwells with Beauty — Beauty that must die;  
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips  
Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,  
Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips:  
Ay, in the very temple of Delight  
Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine.<sup>1</sup>

Quite as abstract, yet more alive and more "picturesque," as one may see from the painting, *Sibylla Palmifera*, are the personifications in no LXXVII ("Soul's Beauty") — love, death, terror, mystery, and beauty (without capitals, it should be observed). And with these should be compared the still more decorative and — so to say — diminishing personifications in XXIV ("Pride of Youth"), where one picture seems to stand

<sup>1</sup> This point was noticed by Horn, *Studien*, p. 130.

for another, or, rather, simple personification merges into a larger setting. Even further can Rossetti carry this method, until what appears at first to have been personification has become a mere metaphor, though of the hyperphysical sort, in "The Stream's Secret" (stanza xix, the last four lines particularly, after the conventional first line):

Pity and love shall burn  
In her pressed cheek and cherishing hands;  
And from the living spirit of love that stands  
Between her lips to soothe and yearn,  
Each separate breath shall clasp me round in turn  
And loose my spirit's hands.

Here the image is no longer visual but "musical," just as in Milton's famous and frequently-imitated

— and care  
Sat on his faded cheek. (*Paradise Lost*, I, 601-602.)

What Coleridge demanded for truly imaginative figures, that the two images should blend, is operative here — perhaps not quite so successfully in the last example as in certain others, for Rossetti inclines to the striking and unfused compounds, that is, the Marinistic: one picture interpenetrates the other, and from the resultant we get not a picture at all but a feeling, —

That out of three sounds he frame, not a fourth sound, but a star.

Thus, in its special way, does that which began as a simple symbolism rise to a quasi-mystical height.

#### IV. MYSTICISM

This word mysticism is a much-suffering term, and though defying careful definition needs repeated defin-

ing. Some attention to it, however, is necessary as a clarifying consequent of what has often been said of Rossetti's fleshliness, if not the atmospheric closeness of the sonnets. One is not concerned to extenuate, but to understand. Buchanan's great fault was his perverse unwillingness — perhaps one had better say inability — to see what Rossetti was doing, and so distinguish between his ways and the ways of Baudelaire and the Satanists.

The English poet and critic, F. W. H. Myers (who is now too much neglected), expounded one phase of Rossetti's mysticism in his invaluable essay "Rossetti and the Religion of Beauty."<sup>1</sup> But before we come to that, it will be wise to review some general principles.

Rossetti is sometimes regarded as the leader of the so-called Aesthetic Movement. In many ways he was the originator of the movement and also, as it developed, the "power behind the throne." It might be observed too that Rossetti's influence is to be traced in the last phase of that movement, the decadence of the Wilde, Beardsley, and Dowson period, and the ultimate Nineties. Since this unfortunate decadence evolved partly from Rossettian beginnings, and since the term itself implies with most readers a pejorative judgment — improperly, of course; for beauty is not to be rejected, however it come; and autumn will not yield to spring in loveliness — I must devote a page to its defence.

The matter is usually confused at the outset by those who demand, unconsciously or explicitly, an ethical quality in all art. These persons are not to be silenced; their case may be granted, however, with little hesitation, and then waived. It is an original fact of life that

<sup>1</sup> *Essays: Modern*, London, 1902, pp. 312 ff.

the body persists in attracting souls to it; and while the soul ennobles the body, the body in turn "embrutes" the soul. This is an eternal and inescapable antinomy, which is nowhere more troublesome than in the arts and the artists. It was more puzzling to Rossetti's Victorian day than in our own "scientific" and a-moral times, when the ethical terms of right and wrong are replaced by the psychological terms normal and abnormal. Hence chronologically the decadents fell upon unfortunate times, from the moral point of view, and their qualities suffered from undue exaggeration.

There are, generally speaking, three sources from which we derive beauty: the ideal, or the dream; nature, according as we more or less commonly read the divine into it; and the actuality of mankind. There can be no question about the first two; speculation and criticism have left them almost entirely untouched. Nature may certainly be "red in tooth and claw"; the storm, the avalanche, the greedy ocean, the resistless powers of nature, may be not always beneficent, but they offer us fine backgrounds for pity and terror, and we do not deny their beauty. With mankind it is otherwise.

Nearly all of man's activities are cruel or inept. Man frequently rises to nobility, but the daily round of living is for most people small, foolish, and unsatisfactory. (This is not pessimism, but the common confession of the race. It does not preclude optimism, or perfectibilian hopefulness.) Thus the artist, be he painter, poet, or novelist, when he would portray mankind, is obliged to refine, as we say, or purify away the gross particles, much as the miner removes dirt and quartz from the gold. Then — continuing the figure — this gold is moulded into various forms of beauty. Hence we have,



in our finished works of art, three stages or degrees which have, by a certain familiar perversity of language, attracted to themselves definite though confusing names.

At the bottom are the actualists, those who represent as clearly and directly as they can the cruelty, the folly, the pettiness of living; and these are called, unfortunately, realists. I say unfortunately because the term should be reserved for those artists who study the crude ore of life, disengage it from its irrelevant dross, and present it to us as the true reality of life unobscured by the phenomena of mere diurnal living. These artists, who see into the real through the veil of the present or actual, are the genuine realists; but we call them romanticists because their right name is already preëmpted by their lower brethren. Finally, the idealists reshape the real, which is already a quintessence of the diurnal dross, into a new form corresponding to a beautiful dream or dream of beauty. They are the goldsmiths; their work is art's highest; and they even add precious stones of nature's creation. Their result has often no apparent relation to the material with which the whole process began.

Actualism can, of course, never be art. But there are degrees. No artist remains quite continuously at the same level. The realist (or romanticist) descends *toward* actualism sometimes, and sometimes rises toward idealism. Even the self-announced actualist, mired as he is in the mud and gravel he has chosen to exploit, occasionally ascends toward a larger view and shows us the invisible real in the dull mass of the "facts" of life.

The bearing of these merely sketched generalities on our Rossetti problem and on the vague matter called

mysticism is not, I trust, too remote. The poet, let us say first, never is an actualist. He begins instinctively at a higher level because, in his function as seer, he sees *through* the details of living to a deeper and simpler meaning. Possible exceptions among the *minores* will occur to one: — Crabbe, for instance; but they only emphasize the obvious statement. Some of the famous errors of Wordsworth may serve as further warnings; yet when Wordsworth is successful, as in “The Solitary Reaper,” the emphasis is still greater, for the familiar matter of to-day is clearly not that of a transcript but of an artistic vision.

A difficulty faces us, however, in certain of Rossetti’s so-called “fleshly” passages, and it is, of course, toward these that I have been aiming. In seeking to give expression to the real which lies behind the actual, the poet must frankly undertake to “communicate the incommunicable,” and this he does by the use of symbols. Symbolism, or the representation of one thing by another, is not only the basis of language, but *κατ’ ἐξοχήν*, the special method of poetic language. But symbolism works upon many different levels, varying according to the relation or remoteness of the thing expressed to the thing suggested. Here lies the concealed danger — *latet anguis* — which has brought error and misconception down upon Rossetti’s head. In sonnet XXI, “Love-Sweetness,” the octave describes the more or less carnal delights of love. These Rossetti accepts as natural or normal and has no desire to make us suppose they are symbolic (in the simple sense of the term).

Her mouth’s culled sweetness by thy kisses shed  
On cheeks and neck and eyelids, and so led  
Back to her mouth which answers there for all,



he says. This is a frankly sensuous description of a frankly sensuous affair. There is no other symbolism here than the most elementary symbolism of language. But the sestet of the sonnet puts the matter in a different light: What is sweeter than this, he says, except that without which it would not be sweet at all, namely, the spiritual love which is known only through the physical. The same idea appears in sonnet XXVIII, "Soul-Light," where "after the fulness of all [fleshly] rapture" there gleams in her eyes "a yet more hungering thrill" — that of the soul.

Here we have, of course, simple mysticism in one of its aspects: the communication of the unknowable through the knowable. But here also is the danger which I have mentioned, and a danger which in Rossetti is likely to be a stumbling-block if not a fault — that the symbol itself may stand in the light of the thing symbolized. It is well known that in some of the early forms of Maryolatry the excessive worship of the Virgin's eyes and lips and breasts became an end in itself, and the symbol usurped the spiritual power. Rossetti is not free from liability to this charge. He may deny the intention — and does, rightly and sincerely, no doubt. But the fault remains, though one must call it an artistic rather than a moral fault. I repeat: it is not always thus perhaps in Rossetti's "fleshly" passages; but where a blemish is to be acknowledged, this distinction meets the requirements of explanation.

Rossetti carried symbolism beyond such a simple stage as this, however. Not only is human love, in its ordinary processes, a counterpart and image of the divine, but all that intercourse with the eternal idealisms which is desired and denied to mortal man, all that

striving to rise from the phenomena of living to Life itself, all that eager passionate struggling through mysteries up to the great Mystery — in a word, all that worship which innate religion craves, is but “in some way a transformation of the sexual passion” — at once a sexual and a mystical passion. Woman — her eyes, her lips, her breasts — the visible human loveliness and charm, is an occult presentation of the divine parts and attributes. She is beauty, she is love, she is the supreme god. Through her the embodied soul reaches and arrives to pure Idea. Through her, through a mortal, we other mortals ascend to the immortal summits. This is “no deliberate worship of Baal and Ashtoreth”; it is “a love which appertains to the category of reasoned affections no more; its place is with the visions of saints, the intuitions of philosophers, in Plato’s ideal world.”

To grant all this — a natural and unconscious Platonism — to Rossetti is very high praise indeed, but it is not unjustified for parts of “The House of Life.” It is no more than adequate for sonnet LXXVII, “Soul’s Beauty” — as Myers (from whom I have just quoted) makes sufficiently plain; and this Rossetti is manifestly visible in the first sonnet of the sequence and (somewhat falteringly) in the last; and in lesser degree here and there through the series, as, for example, in “The Dark Glass” (XXXIV). But of course Rossetti is not wholly with the great mystics; he cannot dwell constantly in their white light. The *selva selvaggia ed aspra e forte* presses too closely upon him, and too often he sees only

As at the end of some deep avenue  
A tender glamour of day.

It is much, however, that he had seen the vision, though he held to it but fitfully; and, if one were to indulge in a

pleading which is as futile as it is unnecessary, one might maintain that his failings on the side of "fleshliness" are simply the tokens of his great desire for the great truth, the shadows which are humanly inseparable from the light.

There can be no question that this is the "secret" of Rossetti's power, his "message." As Benson put it: "That was, then, the task of his life — the *embodiment of mystical passion*" (page 80); or, a little less sympathetically: "To Rossetti the material expression of beauty was the only key to its mystery" (page 79). Or again, in the words of Franz Hueffer:

. . . his wonderfully deep conception of the female type of woman in her relativeness to man. With this we have at last touched the keynote of Rossetti's creative power. For it is this conception of ideal beauty, as revealed in womanhood, and the poet's ardent longing for this ideal, which form the transcendental basis of all his creations.<sup>1</sup>

The same conclusion is reached, less directly, by Watts-Dunton, whose sympathy and understanding of Rossetti's mind must carry more authority than almost any other's. After a statement which at first glance looks like a paradox, that classic art is "the voice of the flesh" and romantic art "the voice of the spirit,"<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Poems by Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, Tauchnitz edition, 1873; "Memoir by Franz Hüffer" [*sic*], p. xxi.

<sup>2</sup> In his "The Truth about Rossetti," cited above, Watts-Dunton distinguished two kinds of art: the symbolic, which he sums up in the Zoroastrian "apparent pictures of unapparent realities," and the dramatic, or imitative of nature, which is Goethe's "simple representation." Then he continues: "That the infirmity of classic art and neo-classic art should be a tendency to sensuousness, and that the infirmity of Romantic Art should be a tendency to asceticism is obvious, for the former is the voice of the flesh, and the latter is the voice of the spirit" (p. 411).

Watts-Dunton (speaking, to be sure, more specifically of Rossetti's painting than of his poetry) sums up the whole matter thus (the italics are his):

*To eliminate asceticism from romantic art, and yet to remain romantic, to retain that mysticism which alone can give life to romantic art, and yet to be as sensuous as the Titians who revived sensuousness at the sacrifice of mysticism, was the quest, more or less conscious, of Rossetti's genius* (page 412).

It is truer of Rossetti's painting than of his poetry perhaps, but certainly biographically true, that "in the later years, the mystic temper dominated all his energies, leading him back to a spiritualization of the flesh, but not to asceticism."<sup>1</sup> And it is an odd irony that, as Rossetti's mysticism deepened, after (say) 1862, his love of the flesh increased in freedom and satisfaction. This seems like a desperate and feverish desire to attain the spirit deliberately through the flesh, to whip up and maintain the spiritual ecstasy (which is in its essence swift and unabiding) by constant repetition and renewal. Such is likely to be the weakness and the tragedy of mystical desire, in some men taking the form of flagellation and various perversions, in others issuing in simple indulgence. At first an ecstatic mingling of body and soul, then a confusion of them.

Thy soul I know not from thy body, nor  
 Thee from myself, neither our love from God.<sup>2</sup>

To preserve the balance of sanity in what can hardly ever be regarded as quite sane or "normal" is the almost impossible problem of pure mysticism. The fusion is for

<sup>1</sup> Watts-Dunton, *loc. cit.*

<sup>2</sup> No. v, "Heart's Hope." Cf. also the last lines of "Love-Lily," which was Song I of the 1870 "House of Life"; and for a more general statement, the close of the "Sea-Limits" (Song XI).

those only who can burn continually with the hard gem-like flame; for the rest the solution is always on the verge of decomposing into its components. Rossetti, with all his fine qualities, was too weak a vessel to hold together in the tremendous heat of this double fire, and probably it is not unfair to say that he succeeded in achieving the true ecstatic fusion only in a few pictures and a few poems. Yet considering the general failure of mankind in this matter, the frequent disasters of those who burn out without leaving any deposit of pure gold, Rossetti's occasional successes are to be given full praise and recognition. Arthur Symons is a little hard, no doubt, though correct for part of Rossetti's work: "Il commençait toujours par l'adoration, puis venait le désir et enfin il se créait des idoles."<sup>1</sup> This is only to say — once more — that he often failed, and sometimes, paying the price, won artistic success.

## V. FLESHLINESS

In the preceding section we approached the question of atmospheric closeness with which "The House of Life" is commonly charged. It is a difficult question to state, lest the statement imply an irrelevant moral judgment, and more difficult to discuss, because it involves not only problems of art and of the ethics of art, but also with Rossetti, the often unrelated question of that mystical absorption of matter and spirit. Where so many have failed I do not hope to succeed, either in settling any of the disputed points or in clarifying much; yet the attempt must be made, and the case stated so far as it concerns Rossetti's "House of Life."

<sup>1</sup> Arthur Symons, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, Paris, 1909, p. 27.

Morality is like a fact of nature; it is unarguable. The common delusion comes from the common phrase: *a question of morality*. But there *is* no question, there is only the fact. But the fact is variable in all but its fundamental quality. "Morality" changes with place and time, and morality in art most of all, because it is even more difficult than any other to dissociate from its concomitants. And thus many estimable persons do argue about this or that, under the impression that they are discussing morality. Art being also a fact to be accepted or rejected, the combination of art and morality presents such a desperate problem that it is no wonder so much ink has been spattered about to so little purpose.

Certainly I do not purpose to "reopen" the case of Rossetti *v.* Buchanan, for the simple reason that there is no case. Nor do I propose a critique of Buchanan's now famous and discredited pamphlet, "The Fleshly School of Poetry and Other Phenomena of the Day" (London, 1872). Since no two persons can see eye to eye in the matter, one is merely wasting breath. It is perhaps enough to hint that Buchanan's journalistic endeavor would be impossible in the early twentieth century. Mrs. Grundy, though not altogether emancipated yet, is more broadminded and tolerant now than she was in the eighteen-seventies; and even if this were not so, one would have the signal example of the *impasse* still apparent in the critic's effort to "judge" the moral "question" of the Restoration comedy of manners. From Parson Collier down through a line of goodly names, including Lamb, Hazlitt, Macaulay, Thackeray, and Meredith, to Mr. Archer, Mr. John Palmer, and others of our contemporaries, there is such a mass of sorry wreckage, so much plain misunderstanding and



mismanagement of the logical and critical machinery, that no one would be tempted to join the failures.

Nevertheless, as a matter of historical record, it is necessary to refer to Buchanan's pamphlet; and since the charge of fleshliness and unwholesomeness still clings to Rossetti's reputation, perhaps some use can be made of Buchanan's argument. I should like to treat the question as one of art alone, but the two — art and morals — have so grown together into a sort of Siamese deformity, that no one can cut the one from the other without destroying both.

Buchanan recanted somewhat handsomely, but somewhat too tardily; and it should be remembered — though I fancy few have latterly read his "Fleshly School" — that at least he pretended to be attacking public standards of morality as well as certain men, particularly Baudelaire and Rossetti, with flourishes on Swinburne and Whitman. Moreover, Buchanan was the author of an article in the *Fortnightly* on "Morality in Art." He is an interesting figure and deserves from some competent biographer a separate study. I use him here simply as a stalking-horse, without pointed malice. That portion of his work which is merely scurrilous one may disregard, but some of his charges are repeated, in other terms, by the late A. C. Benson; and they are, in fact, inevitable, though not unanswerable. Rossetti's own reply, in the *Athenaeum*, to the *Contemporary* article is, one gathers, a pale reworking of the first vivid and fervent draught. It is both moderate and, though touched with sarcasm in a few places, courteous; and so far as it goes, a sufficient defence. But Buchanan went further.

The two storm-centres are unwholesomeness and lack of reticence. Buchanan, indeed, in his sixth section,

generously acknowledges, with some qualification, that "the morality of any book is determinable by its value as literature." But this point, truly fundamental, though obscured by his way of expressing it, is subsidiary to the charge of indecency. Victorian modesty, it seems, was outraged by Rossetti's "putting on record," in "Nuptial Sleep" (no. VIa),

for other full-grown men to read, the most secret mysteries of sexual connection, and that with so sickening a desire to reproduce the sensual mood, so careful a choice of epithet to convey mere animal sensations, that we merely shudder at the shameless nakedness. . . . It is neither poetic, nor manly, nor even human, to obtrude such things as the themes of whole poems. It is simply nasty. Nasty as it is, we are very mistaken if many readers do not think it nice (page 37).

On this point Rossetti observed that the single sonnet was not a "whole poem," but a small part of the whole "analysis of passion and feeling attempted in *The House of Life*"; and pointed triumphantly to the sestet of "Love-Sweetness" (no. XXI), which presents the spiritual aspect of love (the octave, however, is "realistic" enough). The truth is that to Rossetti, with his pagan simplicity, love was as properly physical as spiritual; and he gave abundant recognition to both sides. "The passionate and just delights of the body" are not to be draped with hypocrisy or false modesty. So much for reticence! The word is not in Rossetti's vocabulary. Buchanan was perhaps more Victorian than he supposed he was; we are coming nowadays around to Rossetti's view and even including it as a branch of therapeutics.

Mr. Benson echoes the same charge:

In Rossetti, what offends is a certain softness of execution, but more a want of reserve, which makes him at times as if



overmastered by a kind of sensuous hysteria. . . . There are moments when one fears, as it were, to catch Rossetti's eye, and when there is a lack not only of dignity but of decorum (page 135).

This is well put. There are, apparently, certain inhibitions which are not to be denied. It will not do, quite, to say that this is a matter of taste or temperament. The historical aspect is not to be overlooked, however. Mr. Benson presents admirably the case of British decorum. Being ashamed, it expects a sense of shame in others. What is voluptuous becomes seductive and (magic word) *immoral*. And thus, one is tempted to add, does the horrid monster, otherwise so zealously repressed and concealed, thrust forth his prurient head.

Buchanan noted likewise, in a long and finely rhetorical passage (page 34), "a sense of weary, wasting, yet exquisite sensuality; nothing virile, nothing tender, nothing completely sane; a superfluity of extreme sensibility, of delight in affected forms, hues, and tints."

Mr. Benson adds (page 135): "It is true that in many of the sonnets there is a certain weary fever of the body, a passionate voluptuousness which offends and must offend the temperate and controlled spirit." In a word, unwholesomeness.

The two main attitudes toward all art may be distinguished by their extreme manifestations, the sentimental and the intellectual. Both, in these extreme forms, are vicious and sterile, but as we approach the mean and find the two either in a kind of happy solution, as in Chaucer and Shakespeare, or in conflict — as in Milton and Shelley — we reach the complexity of great art. Their common ground, a battleground, is the question of sex, where the *mêlée* still rages

(confused by the shouts of spectators). There are some who are embarrassed by the thought of sex, and others who treat it with mingled indulgence and contempt. The former will take sides against Rossetti, the latter will be puzzled by his deification of sex. The mere critic of literature need not take sides: let him judge the combatants, not the contest.

If in Rossetti's art — painting and poetry — there is often the fragrance of incense rather than of flowers, it is not necessary to cry, *Retro me*. There are many who scent evil in all that they do not like or do not understand; and if to the object of their dislike or misunderstanding there is a background of shadow, they flee at once with horror and fear. Is this attitude (one may ask) any more healthy than the alleged unhealthiness of that which they fled from? There is a beauty of night and a beauty of daylight; there is a sweetness of perfume which is not the perfume of flowers. It is not that one is purer or cleaner or wholesomer than the other; it is that they are different, and perhaps the chief difference is simply that between nature and art. If it suit any reader's fancy or conscience to prefer one to the other, we can only say that it is so, taking care that the moral judgment does not conceal an artistic judgment.

Finally, however, we come to this latter judgment. Below the large utterance of the great poet's best work there are two kinds of beauty to be recognized, which may be called "natural" and "artistic." These do not exist alone, but are often interwoven or juxtaposed even in single passages. Other terms might be "simple" and "complex." The purity and grace of the former make it especially attractive to us, not to speak of the ease with which it is apprehended. For these and other rea-

sons we may instinctively prefer it, but we need not erect this preference into a prejudice against the deliberate or conscious artistry of those poets who, like Virgil and Milton and, in their lesser way, Tennyson and Rossetti, do not quite conceal the fact that they are artists. Here lies the true charge against Rossetti as poet — excess of artistry. Too often one feels that sense of strain which Hazlitt felt in Milton. The rack and torture of composition become a little too apparent. Partly it is a matter of inadequate expression; partly also of the matter to be expressed. The density as of a hothouse atmosphere, the over-sweetness as of tuberoses, the pervading effect of artificiality — such, where they are found, constitute the most serious charge against “The House of Life.” If in any degree I have succeeded in disengaging them from the complaint of moral unwholesomeness, I have done more than I could hope.

#### VI. TITLE AND SUBTITLE: HETEROGENEITY AND UNITY

Rossetti apparently used the term “House” vaguely in its astrological sense. The whole heavens, both above and below the horizon, are divided into twelve parts by great circles drawn through the north and south points of the horizon. These divisions, or houses, are numbered in order, and named as well; the first is the house of life, the second that of fortune, and so on. Rossetti possessed a great deal of out-of-the-way information, but it is doubtful if he attached any specifically “scientific” meaning to the phrase “house of life.” Sir Walter Scott, for example, whom Rossetti read with pleasure, had used it more than once in a general sense, and Ros-

setti may well have been attracted by its high-sounding poetic quality.

It has been rightly said that the title of Rossetti's great sonnet-sequence, *The House of Life*, is too catholic in its import. It is rather the House of Love; but the title is significant, because it shows the place that Love held in Rossetti's philosophy, and proves clearly enough that for him love was the all-embracing secret and mystery of life.<sup>1</sup>

This is true enough, except in so far as it implies a philosophic generalization on Rossetti's part which would reveal his whole interpretation of life. Rossetti recognized in *living* the larger variety of the human comedy, with its proper place for robust gaiety and vigorous enjoyment of the world. He has not intended to put into the limited compass of his hundred sonnets his whole philosophy of life. To be sure, their scope is hardly narrower, in their special way, than that of *Paradise Lost*, for example, on its different scale; but is it not dangerous, if not critically wrong, to regard them as more than they pretend to be, the record of a series of "crises"? They are incomplete, as any other single representation of life is incomplete, and the very lack of systematic arrangement is sufficient indication that they are not meant as even the *data* for a whole philosophy. I say this in strict view of the conviction that Rossetti believed the Essence of Life to be in some sense the Essence of Love. He himself insisted (of the 1870 version) that nearly one half of the sonnets "has nothing to do with love, but treats of quite other life-influences."<sup>2</sup>

The term "sonnet-sequence" has probably misled some readers. Rossetti did not mean by it that each

<sup>1</sup> A. C. Benson, *Rossetti*, p. 129.

<sup>2</sup> "Stealthy School," in *Collected Works*, i, 482.

sonnet followed the one before it in a logical sequence. By sequence he means no more than series; perhaps even less. When Hall Caine was looking for a title to his collection of sonnets later called "*Sonnets of Three Centuries*," Rossetti offered several suggestions, among them "*A Sonnet Sequence* from Elder to Modern Work." "That," he commented, "would not be amiss." Then he added: "Tell me if you think of using the title *A Sonnet Sequence*, as otherwise I might use it in the *House of Life*."<sup>1</sup>

In 1870 the title was "*Sonnets and Songs Towards a Work to be called 'The House of Life'*"; to which Rossetti added, in brackets, the following explanatory note: "The first twenty-eight sonnets and the first seven songs treat of love. These and the others would belong to separate sections of the projected work."<sup>2</sup> This is not entirely perspicuous, but what it seems to mean is significant. The larger projected work was never completed according to scale or plan; and one may reasonably guess that the later subtitle, "*A Sonnet-Sequence*," was a kind of compromise. The separate sections of "*The House of Life*" as it now stands are "*Youth and Change*" and "*Change and Fate*"; love is treated of in both. Apparently there was to be a section devoted to love, and others to other topics. Before 1870 the peculiar tragedy which darkens the background of "*The House of Life*" was well in the past; only the

<sup>1</sup> Hall Caine, *Recollections*, p. 244. The letter is undated, but must have been written in the last years of Rossetti's life. Hall Caine's *Sonnets of Three Centuries* was issued in 1882.

<sup>2</sup> The first twenty-eight were nos. II, III, IV, VI, VIA, VII, VIII, IX, X, XI, XV, XVI, XXI, XXIII, XXV, XXXVI, XXXVII, XXXVIII, XXXIX, XLV, XLVI, XLVII, XLVIII, XLIX, L, LI, LII, LV of the 1881 *Ballads and Sonnets*, and subsequent editions.

haunting memory remained, and remained till the poet's death. It was, therefore, not a change of vision that altered the first plan, though what else it may have been we do not know — probably health and other interests. But instead of the projected work with its separate sections, we have only a series or sequence of sonnets divided into two parts, without a distinct or emphatic principle of grouping.

Mr. Benson admits finding no definite plan in "The House of Life" —

but it is in effect a sort of commentary on life as Rossetti conceived it [again the error of mistaking the part for the whole], and there is a certain evolution of experience throughout. It opens in hope and youth; then death strikes sternly through the sweet dream and shatters the vase of life; then the fragments are, so to speak, pieced together in sadness and despair, but the glimmer of hope grows stronger until patience, if not tranquillity, is attained.<sup>1</sup>

Another critic sees the matter even more darkly. It is a "mere sonnet-sequence — a series of individually perfect but entirely independent pieces."<sup>2</sup> Mr. Elton finds rather more arrangement. Part I is more personal than Part II, he says, and

a kind of plan may be traced in it, or rather a procession of the three figures Love, Death, and Hope. Love at first triumphs, so that Hope is at first needless. Later, Hope is clouded with fear and foretaste of Death, who at last seizes the beloved. This series, though, is interrupted by many digressions.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Benson, p. 130.

<sup>2</sup> W. Basil Worsfold, in *The Nineteenth Century*, xxxiv (1893), 286.

<sup>3</sup> Oliver Elton, *A Survey of English Literature*, iv, 10. As will appear below, it is possible to understand the meaning of the sequence rather differently.



The poet himself divided all his sonnets into two sorts, the "occasional" and those "depending on a line or two clearly given you, you know not whence, but calling up a sequence of ideas."<sup>1</sup> This may help us indirectly in seeking what order we can in the series; and this and a few hints from elsewhere, such as the *Fortnightly* grouping and the 1870 version and the dates of composition, are all the outside clues we possess. Of course it would be presumptuous to attempt a rearrangement of the sonnets, for Rossetti gave considerable attention to their final order, and whether he was finally satisfied or not, the arrangement he determined on should carry full weight with us. Nevertheless I propose to "divide and subdivide" — as it were, experimentally.

First may be segregated those sonnets which do not clearly fall in with the two subtitles, "Youth and Change" and "Change and Fate." Among these are certainly the introductory stanza on the Sonnet and the introductory stanzas of Part II (nos. LX and LXI) — all three a kind of *Ars Poetica*. And to these I should add the three early stanzas, "Old and New Art" (LXXIV-LXXVI)<sup>2</sup> and — with hesitation — "Genius in Beauty" (XVIII). Next may be taken the three called "The Choice" (LXXI-LXXIII, also early), which in tone, if not in subject, fit rather ill with the majority of the sonnets; and with them the equally early and somewhat similar "Retro me, Sathana!" (XC).

Part I (as it now stands) is chiefly devoted to Love — I shall return to consider it as a whole — but contains one other motif, the poet's insomnia and remorse, in

<sup>1</sup> Scott, *Autobiographical Notes*, ii, 150-151.

<sup>2</sup> These three were composed in 1848-49; the first was published in the 1870 volume, but was not included in "The House of Life."

"Sleepless Dreams" (XXXIX), to be echoed again in LXII; yet this sonnet is closely linked in tone with the preceding (love-) sonnet, and the two together form a kind of introduction to the Despair-Hope-Love motif of the succeeding stanzas. Part II, however, is apparently more miscellaneous, and contains a number of sonnets which do not relate specifically to the main theme of love and sorrow, and which may be taken together as a loose group illustrating the Manysidedness of Life. This begins with the fourth stanza, LXIII, "Inclusiveness." Then after an interval comes "Autumn Idleness" (LXIX), an "occasional" sonnet written at Penkill in 1869;<sup>1</sup> "The Hill Summit" (LXX), a general observation (though perhaps with a particular application) on the rise and fall of a man's career; then the two detached interludes already mentioned, "The Choice" and "Old and New Art"; then the separate contrasting stanzas, "Body's Beauty" and "Soul's Beauty" (LXXVII, LXXVIII); then "The Monochord" (LXXIX),<sup>2</sup> a difficult sonnet, perhaps a query on the meaning of existence, or a statement of the oneness of music and spirit; then a similar stanza, "From Dawn to Noon" (LXXX), on the mysteries of life, with a resemblance to or reminiscence of LXX. The next, "Memorial Thresholds" (LXXXI) is both a part of the main structure and also a detached observation on the association of happiness with a definite locality (room); and it also recalls LXIII with which the group opens.

The remaining twenty stanzas — even perhaps including XC, already referred to as detachable — are

<sup>1</sup> This was in the 1870 volume, but was not included in "The House of Life."

<sup>2</sup> LXXVII, LXXVIII, and LXXIX were in the 1870 volume, but were not included in "The House of Life."



more or less closely united in a rhythmic threnody of doubt, despair, and hope. At first the poet comments generally on the *carpe diem* theme, LXXXII: shall one seize the proffered hour of joy? He has let it slip, however, and not even the beauty of spring can conquer his despondency (LXXXIII). The hint of suicide is then developed in the next (semi-occasional) stanza,<sup>1</sup> and he returns (LXXXV, LXXXVI) to the painful memories of wasted opportunity. Again death tempts him (LXXXVII); he pauses to doubt if Love is *ever* a blessing; he asks the unanswerable questions of life-after-death, and adds a rebuke to death's temptation.<sup>2</sup> The struggle of those two warring hopes which has wrecked his own life (XCI) reminds him of the mockery and tragedy of all life, though this mockery and tragedy may be followed by some "merry" spring of recompense (XCIII). Yet if life has brought him little, death can take little away (XCIV). Has he not seen life? and lived? he but awaits death (XCV). Then, with a marked contrast, he turns back to an earlier day of hope, when Life was his "friend" (XCVI), only to be reminded (as in LXXXVI before) the more poignantly by that moment of Peace<sup>3</sup> of the waste which his life has been and of the "frail screen" which separates him from death (and perhaps punishment). How strange that this might-have-been should also be the same who once knew Life and Hope as friends! But death again tempts him; for the love and song and art which were once his have fled. Finally, with almost a benedictional calm, he asks again the unanswerable questions of life-after-

<sup>1</sup> LXXXIV was published in the 1870 volume, but was not included in "The House of Life."

<sup>2</sup> This is a *possible* rendering of xc; note l. 11.

<sup>3</sup> xcvii, ll. 10-11, and the preceding sonnet.

death; which he answers with mysterious and ambiguous words of hope.

Thus the continuity of Part II may be conceived. It is Change and Fate. The Change had already urged itself into the story of Part I; now it expands ominously into Fate. At first he tells us that, taught by the very ardor and anguish of his heart, his verse will show the little cloud of song growing to the overcast darkness and "abundant rain" of tears. Then he reviews, as in a glass darkly ("the soul's sphere"), the beauty and the sorrow of his life, shadowed in sleepless dreams, and asks whether the vision forebode a bright dawn or black death (LXII); and after calling back memories of old joy and peace and strength, he repeats the question (LXVIII). Now follows a series of general comments on life and its varied aspects, a premonitory undertone audible throughout, and at length the sequence closes with prolonged chords of the deep troubled music of doubt and remorse, death and despair — above which rises, faintly at first, then plainly but not loud, the thin note of hope.

If in this attempt to find coherence in apparent disunion I have simplified and subtilized overmuch, the fault may be forgiven. There can be no doubt, at any rate, that with proper allowance for rhythmic alternation of feeling and idea, the tone of Part II is as genuinely unified as one could expect in a sonnet-sequence — as much as one finds in Petrarch or Shakespeare or Mrs. Browning. Can a similar coherence be discovered in Part I?

The sequence of stanzas in Part I is rather more complicated with the biographical problems than in Part II. In the latter we need remember only that painful story

of despondency and remorse following on the memories of happier days. The story of those happier days is less easy to trace. But perhaps the first fact to grasp is that the love sonnets were not all written to the same woman. Many have read "The House of Life" simply as a glorification of the poet's wife, — the familiar tale of love and loss, — like another "Vita Nuova," or "Epipsychidion," or "Sonnets from the Portuguese." This is quite wrong: Part I of "The House of Life" has no such simple unity of background as these other love poems.

For the long series of female portraits which is Rossetti's great and permanent work as a painter, it used to be supposed that Elizabeth Siddal Rossetti sat as the one model, either in the flesh or in a husband's pious memory. But it will be recalled that William Michael took some pains to refute this common misconception,<sup>1</sup> and it is now known by all who care to read even the Memoir that a dozen different women sat in turn for those "Rossetti" heads with the "long lithe" neck, full lips, deep eyes, and tense brows. Similarly, various women sat for the love-sonnets of "The House of Life." It is rather strange that people should allow painters many models, yet expect a poet to have only one. The artist of line and color may portray whom he will, and the layman asks only if it be a tolerable likeness; the artist of words is supposed to exhibit a monogamous "sincerity." He shall address his love poetry to one only — preferably his wife — or do what he can to hide the scandal. The painter forsooth is as detached and impersonal as a camera; the poet utters his private emotions. A painter hires his model, a poet loves his "model." This is some-

<sup>1</sup> *L. and M.*, i, 241 ff.

thing, as Lord Dundreary used to say, that a fellow can't be expected to understand.

Moreover, although the biographical sketches were for a long time silent on the subject, Rossetti seems actually to have loved, not only his wife and the Other, but also several of his models. The subject of "The Portrait" (no. X), for example, which one might easily suppose to be Mrs. Rossetti, is very probably Miss Wilding; the offending "Nuptial Sleep," first called "Venere Placata," which William Michael himself dated 1868, was moved back by Professor Tisdell to 1853-62, as a more decorous or conjugal date.<sup>1</sup>

Another fact to be considered is the concrete evidence offered by the group of nos. XLI, XII, XXXIV, XXII, all unmistakably "occasional" and personal, and all written while Rossetti was at Kelmscott in the summer of 1871. When read together they make a very definite impression.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, one should note the arrangement of the six-

<sup>1</sup> For other details of this nature, see the Notes *passim*. The statements here, even with the partial support of them in the Notes (see particularly on no. xcvi) will seem to many readers insufficiently justified. I can only say that, what with William Michael's hints and Sir Hall Caine's indirect but unmistakable statements, as well as the nervously self-conscious hesitations of others, they seem to *me* to represent the truth. In the nature of things, at present no concrete and positive evidence can be cited. It is unfortunate that this is so, since so much depends upon one's acceptance of them, but — *sic se res habent*. Many of the sonnets were certainly written with Mrs. Rossetti in mind. Many were certainly written for the Innominata, and many to a beloved who can not and need not be identified with either of these or with any other particular person. The fact that "Venere Placata" was written (probably) after Mrs. Rossetti's death is of course only presumptive evidence that some other woman was its subject.

<sup>2</sup> With these should be read "Cloud Confines," written at the same time. Cf. Scott, *Autobiographical Notes*, ii, 142.

teen sonnets published in the *Fortnightly* in 1869. When the order of the 1870 and that of the 1881 "House of Life" are compared, it is noticeable that, while many sonnets are inserted, there is only one alteration in the sequence.<sup>1</sup> But certain differences appear in the 1869 order.<sup>2</sup> The four "Willowwood" stanzas were of course together — the comforting vision of his dear Lady. This was followed by "Sleepless Dreams," "Lost on Both Sides," "The Vase of Life" (then called "Run and Won"), "A Superscription" (remorse for his wasted life), "Winged Hours" (later used as one of the "foreboding" stanzas of Part I), "The Landmark" (regret for a wrong choice), "Broken Music" (to the "bitterly beloved"), "Lost Days," "Known in Vain" (see Notes below), "Inclusiveness," and the two on "Newborn Death." Four of these sixteen are known to be earlier; eight are known to have been written in 1869; and the remaining four probably in 1869. There is thus a kind of unity in time of composition, and certainly a unity of tone, but it is difficult to say that the different arrangement throws any real light on the individual stanzas or on the "story."

Let us now return to Part I as a whole.

<sup>1</sup> The details are as follows: with the omission of *via* and the addition of *i* and *v*, the first ten of 1870 are the first eleven of 1881; *xv* and *xvi* were *xi* and *xii* in 1870; *xxxvi-xxxix* were *xvi-xix* in 1870; *xlvi-liv* were *xx-xxvii* in 1870; *lxvii* and *lxviii* were *xxxi* and *xxxii* in 1870; *lxxi-lxxiii* were *xxxv-xxxvii* in 1870; *lxxxii* and *lxxxiii* were *xxxviii* and *xxxiv* (the one exception); *lxxxv-lxxxvii* were *xxxix-xli* in 1870; *xc-xcii* were *xliv-xlii* in 1870; *xcvii-ci*, the final group, were *xlvi-l*, all written about 1869. This one rearrangement consists in moving "Barren Spring," which was between "The Hill Summit" and "The Choice," to a place in the large group of twenty stanzas with which the sequence closes. See text above.

<sup>2</sup> Thus: *xliv-liv*, *xxxix*, *xcv*, *xcvii*, *xxv*, *xxvi*, *xlvi*, *lxxxvi*, *lxv*, *lxviii*, *xcix*, *c*.

The "theme" is announced in no. I: Love is lord of the House of Life. The second sonnet presents at once the earthly love and its spiritual counterpart, the love of "our bodiless souls." The third is again mystical: Love is a sacrament, Love is Christ the Saviour. The fourth introduces the note of foreboding. The fifth again is mystical: body and soul are one. Then come three stanzas celebrating mainly physical love — leading to the union of both physical and spiritual again in no. IX. These are all in a sense impersonal. The next is "occasional": "The Portrait." The following stanzas ring the many changes on the dual theme of Passion and Worship, with an occasional interruption, such as "Genius in Beauty" (XVIII), and the recurrent foreboding (XXV), which becomes more distinct. With XXXVI and XXXVII we find for the first time the new theme of inconstancy or the Two Loves.<sup>1</sup> The former refers to his dead wife and must have been written after the exhumation of the MS.; the latter is a kind of apologia for loving another. The note of despondency and conflict now deepens; the new love is an unhappy one of partial fulfilment and separation. Death and Hopelessness appear more frequently. But Part I ends, appropriately, with a glorification of True Woman and a tribute to Love and Poetry.

It would be profitless, if not impossible, to sort and catalogue in detail the various aspects and occasions of the separate love-sonnets. It will be enough to repeat that love is presented in many forms, ranging from the completely physical to the purely spiritual; and that the love is, from the strictly biographical point of view, not

<sup>1</sup> I trust it is clear that the first thirty-five sonnets do not celebrate a single beloved woman.



that of the poet for one single woman, while from the artistic point of view it is love simply, without distinction of one or more persons, except in those few sonnets which concern the conflict between his love for his wife and that for another. Absolute order, schematic arrangement, does not appear in the successive stanzas, and could not be expected; for no consecutive narrative is attempted. Rather, there run through the whole series certain leitmotifs which are the leitmotifs of Rossetti's own life: passion of love, both human and mystical; indulgence and adoration; premonition of separation and of death; love won but frustrate; sleepless despair over a life mislived, hopes unfulfilled, effort unrewarded or unexerted; self-doubt and achievement; longing for death; questionings of the future life; the one faint hope. There are no complaints of unrequited love, no beseechings of a cold heart, no charges of infidelity, — the usual ingredients of a long love poem — for these are not in Rossetti's experience. In a word, "The House of Life" is the house of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's life, the story of the poet's own experience — not a story complete in all its details, because such would be impossible with Rossetti's conception of art, but a complete revelation of his heart, its joy and its suffering; and yet not of his heart alone, but of his other emotions as well. It has little unity of a formal kind; on the contrary, its unity is the unity of Rossetti's life.

#### VII. AUTOBIOGRAPHY

We have the testimony of William Michael that Rossetti's "House of Life" "embodies salient incidents and emotions in his own life"; and in various senses it is a "life-work." Again: "there are very few of the son-



nets which are not strictly personal, and not one through which his individual feelings and views do not transpire.”<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, it is a fact that, when he was preparing to print the 1881 volume, Rossetti discussed with himself and with others the inclusion or omission of a note explicitly disavowing that the sonnets of “The House of Life” were the record of “moments” from his personal experience, insisting rather that the “Life” was generalized or representative of ideal experience.<sup>2</sup> Here the brother is certainly nearer the truth than the poet, though it is easy to understand what the poet *meant*. He meant first, to protect himself from the prying curiosity of strangers, and second, to declare that, whatever might have been the original impetus to composition, the resulting sonnet was not a personal record. There is no difficulty, however, in reconciling the two statements. Apparently contradictory, they are really complementary — a single statement expressed from opposite points of view.

Though there is, as I have said, no biographical im-

<sup>1</sup> Prefatory Note to “The House of Life,” Siddal Edition, London, 1901, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Through the kindness of Mr. Page, and with the permission of Mr. S. C. Cockerell, I give Rossetti’s own words. From Note Book IV, in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge: “These poems are in no sense ‘occasional.’ The ‘Life’ recorded [*alt.* involved] is neither *my* life nor *your* life, but life purely and simply [*alt.* representative] as tripled with Love & Death.” From the Fitzwilliam “House of Life” (1881): “To speak in the first person is often to speak most vividly; but these emotional poems are in no sense ‘occasional.’ The ‘Life’ involved is life representative, as associated with love and death, with aspiration and foreboding, or with ideal art and beauty. Whether the recorded moment exist in the region of fact or of thought is a question indifferent to the Muse, so long only as her touch can quicken it.” In Rossetti’s letters to Watts-Dunton, 8 May and 20 August, 1881, he discussed the question of inserting in the printed edition a note of “disavowal of personality in the sonnets.”

perative in literary criticism, still, with this high authority from William Michael, in spite of the poet's own disclaimer, we should feel justified in examining "The House of Life" as an autobiographical record. Our chief handicap or ground for hesitation, however, is not ethical, or even critical, but historical; for the biography of Rossetti has never been written, perhaps never will be.

Our official knowledge of Dante Gabriel Rossetti comes almost entirely from his brother, William Michael, who states plainly that he is not telling the whole truth, and who often garbles what he does tell by deliberate and rather puerile mystifications. The "Memoir" (1895) is an expanded *Ave, Frater*; the other biographical apparatus coming from William Michael is always informing, but unduly inclined to the fraternal. The desired biography by Watts-Dunton should have been better, though it too would have been very respectful (as such works ought to be, perhaps); that of Hall Caine, in two separate sketches, is well-intentioned but not always in the best taste; that of Benson often unsympathetic and needlessly guarded, inasmuch as Benson had none of the personal attachment which impeded the brother and the attendant. For the rest, we depend upon unofficial hints, scraps, and the usual indirect sources, most important of which are two selections of the Letters and Scott's "Autobiographical Notes." These difficulties, however, have nothing uncommon about them; it is the quasi-poetic legend fostered in divers ways which has wrought the disaster, if the term is not too immodest, and left late-comers the necessity of unhaloing a mortal and the awkwardness of seeming to pry behind the pious concealments of family

and friendly devotion, of unlocking private cupboards and closets with heaven knows what not of macerating secrets half hidden in dark corners. Yet legend often idealizes downward as well as upward; and when the last veil has been twitched off, we can be bold to confess that a Dante Rossetti stands revealed different, but not less noble, than the gilded traditions of the unknowing and the doubtful intimations of the faithful.

"The House of Life" contains nearly all of the emotional history of the poet, from the high Pre-Raphaelite hopes of youth to the fatal tragic despair in which his life closed. Yet all the way the paths are carefully obscured, the guide-posts removed, and the course of the investigator made hard. Rossetti was not revealing himself in the sonnets, but was a "racked and tortured medium" suffering the ineluctable torment of passions that demanded release in language. Since the chances of error are thus numerous and increase in a geometric proportion as one pushes on, he must be unusually bold who would court the inevitable blunder of a thorough-going biographical annotation of the sonnets. The present investigator, for one, is content to find glimpses here and there, and, relating what he knows, to try to avoid the temptation to hint more than is actually known. In lieu then of the complete story I offer a bare sketch.

Early in 1850 Rossetti, then nearly twenty-two, having had "no juvenile amours, *liaisons*, or flirtations," fell in love ("most deeply and profusely"<sup>1</sup>) with a rather handsome young woman, not too well educated

<sup>1</sup> William Michael's words, *L. and M.*, i, 171, 173. The fullest account of Mrs. Rossetti is that by William Michael in *The Burlington Magazine* i (1903), 273 ff.

— Elizabeth Siddal — then a milliner's assistant, and daughter of a Sheffield tradesman. She was frail and consumptive, and neither of the lovers could afford marriage. For about four years he was with her pretty constantly and always in love. Then, perhaps through his new friends, Burne-Jones, Morris, and Swinburne, whom he came to know during his work on the ill-starred paintings in the Oxford Union, he met and fell passionately in love with another woman, whose identity is still unrevealed. This woman, whom in the following Notes I have called the New Beloved and the Innominata, and this love, with all its intensity and its "hour" of abandon, are celebrated in "The House of Life." Sonnets addressed to her are inextricably, and no doubt deliberately, intermingled with those addressed to Elizabeth Siddal and to others; he would be rash indeed who ventured to assign each portrait to its sitter. By 1860 the poet's financial circumstances permitted marriage, and with what may seem a strange devotion to duty, and sense of obligation to a promise of nearly ten years' standing, on May 23, he and Elizabeth Siddal were married. In spite of the equivocal defence offered by William Michael, it is quite certain that Rossetti was not by habits or temperament well adapted to the conjugal life. His ways were not vicious, they were incompatible; and perhaps his wife was equally unfitted for domesticity. But this is not the point, and moreover they were for a time very happy. The point is that Rossetti married the woman whom he had loved ten years before and doubtless still cared for, but not as he loved the Innominata. To this trying position was soon added the distress of gradually becoming aware that his wife had begun to know and understand. Given

two high-strung sensitive natures, and this ominous situation becomes one of torment and anguish; which did not, however, prevent the poet from "getting awfully fat and torpid" — as he wrote to Madox Brown.<sup>1</sup> On February 11, 1862, after less than two years of marriage, Mrs. Rossetti died of an overdose of laudanum (which she had been taking regularly for acute neuralgia). The circumstances invite and at the same time repel conjecture.<sup>2</sup> To the husband their very uncertainty made them the more terrible. Thereafter Rossetti lived for a time with his mother, and then moved to the house in Cheyne Walk which remained his home until a few months before his own death. Of his life of semi-seclusion in this strange house many intimate details are known, others left to friendly or unfriendly surmise. During the next few years he painted some of his finest pictures, — *Beata Beatrix*, *The Beloved*, *Lilith*, *Venus Verticordia*, *The Blue Bower*, *Sibylla Palmifera*, and Mrs. William Morris, along with many others — but wrote very little. It was apparently at this time that he first turned freely, though not indiscriminately, to the "snare" of Lady Lilith, and the distinction between model and mistress becomes hard to draw. Even here, however, the peculiar temperament of Rossetti must be reckoned with: "When he loved a woman, it was because he must, not because he would," Watts-Dunton tells us, and we are bound to give him credence.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> December 2, 1861; in *L. and M.*, i, 212.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Swinburne, who had to testify at the inquest, wrote to his mother, 13 March, 1862: "Happily there was no difficulty in proving that illness had quite deranged her mind, so that the worst chance of all was escaped." *A. C. Swinburne, Personal Recollections*, by his cousin, Mrs. Disney Leith, New York, 1917, p. 110.

<sup>3</sup> Benson puts it thus: "Rossetti cannot be described as a man who submitted to current views of morality. He loved swiftly and almost

Meanwhile his health began to give way. Trouble with his eyes and insomnia led to nervous worry and, in turn, to chloral and whiskey. In the summer of 1869, visiting Bell Scott in Ayrshire, he resumed poetry, having already in March published in the *Fortnightly* sixteen of the "House of Life" sonnets. Scott tells two curious incidents which reflect the state of Rossetti's mind — one an apparent temptation to suicide, the other his picking up a small bird along the roadside, convinced it was his wife's soul returned to him. Then followed the exhumation of his MS. poems,<sup>1</sup> the successful volume of 1870, with its trail of abuse from Buchanan in the *Contemporary* article and the "Stealthy School" reply; and there were other attacks in the reviews. Now came continued illness, complicated with "a too active and unappeased imagination,"<sup>2</sup> hallucinations, despondency, a form of mania, and a complete breakdown physical and mental. And it was during this darkest period that so large a portion of "The House of Life" was composed. By the summer of 1871 Rossetti was somewhat restored to health, and in September went to live with the Morrisises at Kelmscott, Morris himself being, during a part of Rossetti's stay, in Iceland. The next ten years were years of alternating relapse and recovery, culminating unscrupulously; but he was in no sense a profligate; his faults were the faults of passion, not restrained by the ordinary social code" (p. 56). "The Honeysuckle" (Song 1x of the 1870 "House of Life"), read as autobiography, tells the same story. The curious may care to note Lafcadio Hearn's interpretation of this little poem, *Pre-Raphaelite and Other Poets*, pp. 4 f.

<sup>1</sup> Eleonora Duse's comment on this affair is interesting. "All Rossetti is in that story of the MS. buried in his wife's coffin. He could do it, he could repent of it; but he should have gone and taken it back himself: he sent his friend!" (Quoted by A. Symons, *Studies in Seven Arts*.)

<sup>2</sup> *L. and M.*, i, 304.



ating in the terrible illness related with much sympathy and vividness by Sir Hall Caine. I need not repeat the details here.

It is not difficult, surely, to understand in some measure the mind which is reflected in "The House of Life" — all that brooding over death, that horror of despair, that conflict of two great loves followed by many lesser ones (desperate escapes), that unforgiveness of self for what seemed like his wife's suicide. "A too active and unappeased imagination"; chloral; alcohol; physical illness; haunted memories; maniacal delusions; tortures of a sensitive conscience doubled by doubt and trebled by remorse — well may "The House of Life" appear to be dark with mystery and unwholesome with spectres. Such is Rossetti's life, and such must be its record; and yet so nearly saved to art by beauty of language. Without the dual outlet of poetry and painting the man would have gone quite mad. What wonder if shadows hang over the house of his life?

### VIII. CONCLUSION

For no poems so much as the sonnets of "The House of Life" have we to thank the Italian stock. . . . For in these sonnets deep themes of life and love, of death and ultimate hope, are set to a music new to our British ears, and have been thought out in a channel differing widely from the channels usually cut by our poets for such themes: the love-sonnets have a burning reality hardly ever attained as here without any shade of licentiousness; behind the highest rhapsody-point of love may be discerned always the shadow of earnest life; and something of the sad shadow of anticipated death is felt through the very strength and depth of the life-shadow. No recklessness of love-utterance is here to mar the greatness of the work, and no flaw of work to mar the greatness of the theme: the heart is right, and the head is right, and the hand



is right; and the fifty sonnets are an unexampled perfection: to them, considered as sonnets and a poem of sonnets, all others in our language must give place. — H. BUXTON FORMAN, *Our Living Poets, An Essay in Criticism*, London, 1871, pp. 207 f.

Taken as a whole, this series of sonnets constitutes in its class the greatest gift that poetry has received since the days of Shakespeare. . . . A series such as this, which is, in fact, a life's utterance and a life's story, modern literature does not possess. — JOSEPH KNIGHT, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, London, 1887, p. 165.

*The House of Life* touches many passions and depicts life in most of its changeful aspects. It would afford an adequate test of its comprehensiveness to note how rarely a mind in general sympathy with the author could come to its perusal without alighting upon something that would be in harmony with its mood. — HALL CAINE, *Recollections*, p. 33.

But more solemn, more beautiful, more full of a finer force, than these poems ["Jenny," "The Blessed Damozel," "Sister Helen"] are the unrivalled sonnets which build-up *The House of Life*. Here, for the first time since Milton, the English language is used with a sonority and power rivalling the natural harmonies of Italian or Greek. A singular value is given to the motive of these sonnets by the poet's belief in the eternal effect and continual existence of the thoughts and deeds of man. — MADAME DARMSTETER (Mary Robinson), quoted in *Letters and Memoir*, i, 438.

*The House of Life* recalls Shakespeare rather than Dante in its frankness, its richness, and its many obscurities. . . . As in Shakespeare, there is a constant outlook on the mystery of evil, the presentiment of death and loss, and the passing of love and life. It is high metaphysical verse rooted in personal suffering and rapture. — OLIVER ELTON, *A Survey of English Literature*, iv, 10.

We shall not all agree with these encomia; yet they represent the judgments of various critics and cover a considerable period of years. Perhaps Sir Hall Caine's hint in "a mind in general sympathy with the author"

strikes the important and fundamental note. Even more than is usually true of any artist, Rossetti's genius is peculiar. This "specialness" is owing to many causes: his dual birthright as Italian and Englishman, his dual activity as painter and poet, his temperamental sympathy with the Middle Ages, his unfamiliar and rich amalgam of fleshly and spiritual, his more or less conscious devotion to "the latest and most notable development of English art" (as Watts-Dunton wrote in 1883), "the rendering of absolutely poetic motives by realistic methods," and perhaps among them his extraordinary experiences of passion and remorse, to be translated into painted and printed beauty. The man, it is customary to say, was greater than his work. It may be; though it is a question just what this means. If it means that his conception of art was too limited to allow him full expression of all he thought and felt, his warm vitality, his broad rough humor and vigorous gusto of living, his impressive and "magnetic" personality (a royal being, his friends always regarded him, "irresistible in his fascination") — if it means this, it may be partly true. But we of a later day know him only as artist, and if our minds are "in general sympathy" with his, we bend before his greatness and graciously yield him his faults.

Yet such a general sympathy is difficult to bring to his work, or, having once brought, to maintain. For which of us possesses naturally his intense love of difficult wrought beauty, of "incisive concentration" (his own words), of that severe and steady straining toward the exaltation of art? Who of us cares to be, with him,

of those that haunt  
The vale of magical dark mysteries,

or to enjoy for long "the overpowering seductiveness of thought and music" which is his great gift? How many can have even a general sympathy with his strange life of enjoyment and mental suffering, as they both border on something like pathological extremes? We rebel, we are bound to rebel; we are bound to resent his Circean seductiveness, his haunting mysteries, and restless straining; to ask for simple purity and natural sweetness, the open air and fresh winds and sunlight.<sup>1</sup> Hence the many contradictions in our judgment of him. Sir Hall Caine, for example, once the most sympathetic if not the most salutary of friends, turns against him, finding, a dozen years after the poet's death, in "Jenny" only a "cold artistic interest in a picturesque bit of humanity," and adding of the sonnets: "I find less than my old delight in phrases that roll on the tongue 'like delicious wine,' and more than my former dread of the excess of emphasis which robs the work of simplicity and natural dignity."<sup>2</sup>

Rossetti's genius invites these contradictions, for the contradictions were already there in his genius.

"If I have a distinction as a sonnet-writer," said the poet himself, "it is that I never admit a sonnet which is not fully on the level of every other."<sup>3</sup> And in the same letter he continued, with more truth: "The One Hope" "is fully equal to the very best of my sonnets, or

<sup>1</sup> "Thus it is that the book has an enervating effect upon the spirit. It seems shuttered close in a fragrant gloom of strange perfumes which have a perilous and magical sweetness about them. But one longs for something more simple and natural, a breath of fresh woods, or the falling of some sharp and cold wave, with brisk and briny savours. One longs to come out into a place of liberty from this fallen light, this hushed and perfumed chamber" (Benson, p. 136).

<sup>2</sup> In *Poets of the Century*, ed. by H. C. Miles.

<sup>3</sup> Letter to Hall Caine, in *Recollections*, p. 248.

I should not have wound up the series with it." Yet in the next sentence: "But the fact is, what is peculiar chiefly in the series is, that scarcely one is worse than any other. You have too great a habit of speaking of a special octave, sestette, or line. Conception, my boy, FUNDAMENTAL BRAINWORK, that is what makes the difference in art. Work your metal as much as you like, but first take care that it is gold and worth working."

No poet is a good critic of himself. Perhaps Rossetti's greatest fault is that he works his metal too much, and is too easily satisfied that the metal is gold. "If he suffers for anything," says Mr. Elton, "it is his economy, as most writers do for their superfluity. Rossetti's formidable will puts everything ten times through the alembic. Nothing is easy for him, and he cannot make us think it has been easy." Of the two qualities he demanded in a sonnet, brains and music, most unenthusiastic critics will find the former lacking. The fundamental brainwork of conception is applied too often with strenuous energy to a subject we cannot admit as quite justifying the effort. The brainwork of persistent artistry over-towers that of original intelligence. His thought is all feeling — this is his "mysticism." His gift is music, not brains. And in his deliberate conscious devotion to what he conceives to be his gift — if we are to accept quite unreservedly what may have been only a casual remark — he runs to the extreme of laborious pretense and mere idiosyncrasy. Seldom indeed is he insincere, for his devotion is real enough, and almost the weakest of his sonnets is hallowed, for art, by his intensity. If, as has been said, he unconsciously substitutes tenseness for intensity, the *faux bon* for the *vraie vérité*, we must admit that this is not an altogether damning fault, and

we must be extraordinarily careful lest we forget that his best work, that by which any poet is to be finally judged, rises clearly above this weakness. His deficiency — in spite of the regal greatness his immediate friends felt in his bodily presence — is the lack of a great spirit. It is this which keeps him from the circle of the highest poets. His impulsive swift power, an advantage in youth, really prevented him from fully maturing; and that, with the terrible experiences upon which the same impulsive swift power drove him, left him at the end an unfinished man. A great poet, a great artist in two arts, we must grant him to be, and, yes, in the special realm of his peculiar genius, that dark forest of the mysteries of death and life and brooding beauty, lighted with the passion of love earthly and divine, there a great spirit is his, too.

Shall birth and death, and all dark names that be  
As doors and windows bared to some loud sea,  
Lash deaf mine ears and blind my face with spray;  
And shall my sense pierce love, — the last relay  
And ultimate outpost of eternity?

This is his struggle and his artistic achievement.

[*The Sonnet*]

A SONNET is a moment's monument, —  
 Memorial from the Soul's eternity  
 To one dead deathless hour. Look that it be,  
 Whether for lustral rite or dire portent,  
 Of its own arduous fulness reverent:  
 Carve it in ivory or in ebony,  
 As Day or Night may rule; and let Time see  
 Its flowering crest impearled and orient.

A Sonnet is a coin: its face reveals  
 The soul,—its converse, to what Power 't is due: —  
 Whether for tribute to the august appeals  
 Of Life, or dower in Love's high retinue,  
 It serve; or, 'mid the dark wharf's cavernous breath,  
 In Charon's palm it pay the toll to Death.

Date: 1880 (Hall Caine, *Recollections*, p. 121).

This sonnet was sent by the poet to his mother as a birthday gift, April 27, 1880, with a design (later engraved as frontispiece to Sharp); see Rossetti's explanation of the design, *L. and M.*, ii, 358.

"In this introductory sonnet the Poet indicates his conception of the quality and function of the Sonnet as a form of poetic invention and composition" (*R. D. W.*, p. 184.)

Yes and no. The sonnet is much quoted and praised, but what is overlooked generally is that it forms the introduction to the sequence. As a description or characterization of sonnets as distinguished from other short poems it leaves something to be desired. For, except for

the one quality of intense condensation, nearly all that Rossetti says here of the sonnet may equally well be said of any serious personal lyric. Are not all such poems a moment's monument — the expression of a single incident or of a concentrated mood? Are sonnets any more or less revelatory of the "Power" that begets them or the "Soul" that produces them? Do not other poems treat of Life, Love, and Death?

The blame for this misinterpretation, however, is rather the critics' than Rossetti's. Each of the following sonnets, he says, is a monument (more lasting than bronze) to eternalize a moment: this is clearly his announcement that the sequence does not present a codified philosophy or an organized interpretation of life, but rather (in Mr. Hardy's suggestive phrase) "a series of fugitive impressions which I have never tried to co-ordinate." Yet these impressions are not so "objective" as Mr. Hardy's probably are, and they force us to relate them to a "view" of life quite as much as Mr. Hardy's do — though both poets somewhat impatiently deprecate the generalization.

By a moment, however, we are not to understand a mere momentary whim; for as Pater wisely puts it, to Rossetti "life is a crisis at every moment." Thus a simple paradox.

"Lustral rite and dire portent," in prose terms, acts of worship to the gods of Love, Life, and Death, and expressions of pity and terror (the tragedy of life) from the oracles of these gods; <sup>1</sup> reverence or high seriousness and arduous fulness or concentrated intensity — these are the marked characteristics of the "House of Life" son-

<sup>1</sup> There is here also the general idea of tragic catharsis, but more perhaps for the writer than for the reader.



nets. And Love, Life, and Death are the Trinity that rules the house of life. Further,

he must elaborate his sonnet in the spirit of a carver of exquisite nicety — a carver who works in ivory or in ebony, according as his subject comes of light or of darkness, of day or of night. And, as the carving might be studded with orient pearl for crest, so must the sonnet flower with the uttermost refinement of art, for Time to scrutinize and approve (*R. D. W.*, p. 184).

The comparison developed in the sestet is typical — rather remote and *recherché* at first sight, but worked out with such special emphasis of detail as to justify its use.

The two judgments following are worth consideration. The first is by Sir Hall Caine:

It is throughout beautiful and in two of its lines (those depicting the dark wharf and the black Styx) truly magnificent. It appears most to be valued, however, as affording a clue to the attitude of mind adopted towards this form of verse by the greatest master of it in modern poetry (*Recollections*, p. 121).

The second is by William Sharp, who usually has nothing but praise:

The sonnet on the Sonnet that is prefixed to the completed *House of Life* is notable for its opening line or lines, unnecessary again to quote; but beyond this I confess I can see in it no special merit as a sonnet, still less as a sonnet on the sonnet; indeed, on the other hand, it seems to me to have an obscurity equalling the most obscure passages Rossetti has composed elsewhere, and as an explanatory poem, to enlighten no farther than the concise and admirable first, or, at the outside, the first five lines. Comparing the fifth line as it stands in the *Ballads and Sonnets* with the corresponding line in the engraved design which forms the frontispiece to this volume, it will be observed that the word *arduous* has replaced *intricate*, a change which is open to doubt as to being for the

better. It is curious that so careful a sonnet-writer, and one who was so well able to criticise obscurity in the style of another,\* could conclude the octave of a sonnet meant to convey an instructional idea with such rhetorical and absolutely meaningless lines as —

“ . . . ; and let Time see  
Its flowering crest impearled and orient.”

The sestet is almost as obscurely rhetorical as the octave. To apply his own words to himself — “we have to regret that even complete obscurity is a not uncommon blemish, while imperfect expression seems too often to be attributable to a neglect of means, and this despite the fact that a sense of style is certainly one of the first impressions derived from (his) writings. But we fear that a too great and probably organic abstraction of mind interferes continually with the projection of his thoughts;” an application that, with slight modification, is by no means exaggerated (pp. 414 f.).

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\* *The Academy*, February 1, 1871.

PART I

YOUTH AND CHANGE



# I

## *Love Enthroned*

I MARKED all kindred Powers the heart finds fair:—  
 Truth, with awed lips; and Hope, with eyes upcast;  
 And Fame, whose loud wings fan the ashen Past  
 To signal-fires, Oblivion's flight to scare;  
 And Youth, with still some single golden hair  
 Unto his shoulder clinging, since the last  
 Embrace wherein two sweet arms held him fast;  
 And Life, still wreathing flowers for Death to wear.

Love's throne was not with these; but far above  
 All passionate wind of welcome and farewell  
 He sat in breathless bowers they dream not of;  
 Though Truth foreknow Love's heart, and Hope  
 foretell,  
 And Fame be for Love's sake desirable,  
 And Youth be dear, and Life be sweet to Love.

Date: ?1871.

Above all kindred Powers — Truth, Hope, Fame and Oblivion, Youth, Life and Death — sits Love . . . though Truth know of Love before it comes and Hope may predict it, and for Love's sake Fame may be desirable, Youth dear, and Life sweet. That is, Love is the divine Being, which transcends the passing winds of life and dwells in the bowers of bliss on high.

L. 5. Mrs. Rossetti's hair was gold-color, but so also was Lilith's (LXXVIII, 4 and 14).

On the use of personification, cf. Introduction, p. 18.

## II (I, 1870)

*Bridal Birth*

As when desire, long darkling, dawns, and first  
The mother looks upon the newborn child,  
Even so my Lady stood at gaze and smiled  
When her soul knew at length the Love it nurs'd.  
Born with her life, creature of poignant thirst  
And exquisite hunger, at her heart Love lay  
Quickening in darkness, till a voice that day  
Cried on him, and the bonds of birth were burst.

Now, shadowed by his wings, our faces yearn  
Together, as his full-grown feet now range  
The grove, and his warm hands our couch prepare:  
Till to his song our bodiless souls in turn  
Be born his children, when Death's nuptial change  
Leaves us for light the halo of his hair.

Date: ?1851-62 (Tisdell).

The difficulty here lies in the "abrupt transition from one concrete statement to another" (Sharp), clear to the poet, but not easy for the reader because he cannot follow the connecting train of ideas definitely in the poet's mind during the process of composition but omitted in the finished sonnet.

In the octave the Lady stands smiling as she looks upon her newborn child, which is Love, the child of passion's "poignant thirst and exquisite hunger." In the sestet Love is full grown; the Lady and her lover are

“shadowed by his wings” (in 1870 “shielded in his wings”) and tended by Love until finally (second tercet) they are themselves born again — through “Death’s nuptial change” — as the spiritual children of Love.

That is, from the union of Love and Death the lovers are born as “bodiless souls” in the spirit world, just as love is born in the heart of a living woman. The title means not only the birth of love — wherefore the position of the sonnet in the sequence — but also, and more significantly, the ultimate spiritual rebirth of the lovers from the bridal of Love and Death. The last line means that “the light which encircles [Love’s] head shall guide our steps across the dark threshold of death” (*R. D. W.*, p. 186).

Says Knight (p. 166): the sonnet “illustrates the growth of love by the birth of a child, and with all its sweet spiritual significance is almost as much open to the charge of fleshliness as those singled out for arraignment.”

### III (II, 1870)

#### *Love’s Testament*

O THOU who at Love’s hour ecstatically  
 Upon my heart dost evermore present,  
 Clothed with his fire, thy heart his testament;  
 Whom I have neared and felt thy breath to be  
 The inmost incense of his sanctuary;  
 Who without speech hast owned him, and, intent  
 Upon his will, thy life with mine hast blent,  
 And murmured, “I am thine, thou’rt one with me!”



O what from thee the grace, to me the prize,  
And what to Love the glory, — when the whole  
Of the deep stair thou tread'st to the dim shoal  
And weary water of the place of sighs,  
And there dost work deliverance, as thine eyes  
Draw up my prisoned spirit to thy soul!

Entitled in 1870 "Love's Redemption."

Date: ?1853-62 (Tisdell).

The peculiarity of this sonnet consists in its application of religious or Christian symbols to the passion of love. Thus we find in the earlier part of the sonnet the terms testament, incense, sanctuary; and the later part of it shadows forth by analogy the descent of Christ into hell, and his releasing thence the spirits predestined to salvation" (*R. D. W.*, p. 186).

The sonnet is over-elaborate to the last degree; and a full paraphrase of the octave is necessary:

O thou Beloved, who dost always "at love's hour" offer thy heart to mine, thy heart which is on fire with love and which is the pledge and covenant of love; whose breath, as I near thee, I have always felt to be the incense of love's inmost shrine; who hast silently confessed love and mingled thy life with mine, murmuring: "I am thine, and thou art one with me."

In the earlier version (1870) the octave was somewhat simpler, though in the orthodox view more daring:

O thou Beloved, who dost ever offer to my lips "The body and blood of Love in sacrament"; — whose breath . . . ; who hast . . . mingled thy life with mine, murmuring over the communion cup: "Remember me."

Here "the imagery of Sacramental communion was made to symbolize the giving up of one's life to another in love" (Sharp, p. 417).

The sestet fits the earlier form of the sonnet better than its later version. Continuing the apostrophe to his Beloved:

When thou shalt tread the long deep stair to the shore of Acheron and the house of Hades and there deliver the souls of the dead (even as now thou hast drawn upward my soul by the power of thine eyes), how great will be the gracious favor issuing from thee (the grace which is now my prize) and how great will be the glory to Love.

The sonnet may be condensed: Thou art united with me in love as man is united with the Divine by the holy communion; for Love is Christ lifting me up from earth to himself.

L. 2, *heart* was *lips* in 1870. L. 3 read in 1870: "The body and blood of Love in sacrament." L. 8 read in 1870: "And murmured o'er the cup, Remember me!" L. 9, *to* was *for* in 1870.

#### IV (III, 1870)

##### *Lovesight*

WHEN do I see thee most, beloved one?

When in the light the spirits of mine eyes

Before thy face, their altar, solemnize

The worship of that Love through thee made known?

Or when in the dusk hours, (we two alone,)

Close-kissed and eloquent of still replies

Thy twilight-hidden glimmering visage lies,  
And my soul only sees thy soul its own?

O love, my love! if I no more should see

Thyself, nor on the earth the shadow of thee,

Nor image of thine eyes in any spring, —

How then should sound upon Life's darkening slope  
The ground-whirl of the perished leaves of Hope,  
The wind of Death's imperishable wing?

Date: ?1853-62 (Tisdell).

He wonders when it is he sees her most clearly: when his eyes worship at the shrine of her face's beauty, or when in the dimness of night his soul sees only her soul. (Note the mystical passion of flesh and spirit in one.) Then suddenly he thinks of her death. (For this premonition cf. XXV.)

This splendid sonnet is a successful rendering of the thought which Wordsworth failed to bring off in his "Strange fits of passion have I known." The two poems are incommensurable as poetic achievement; a comparison shows up one of the prime weaknesses of Wordsworth's ultra-simple manner, its inability, except on the rarest occasions, to establish and communicate the energy of an intense moment.

At one time Rossetti planned to place this sonnet first in the series.

## V

### *Heart's Hope*

BY what word's power, the key of paths untrod,  
Shall I the difficult deeps of Love explore,  
Till parted waves of Song yield up the shore  
Even as that sea which Israel crossed dryshod?  
For lo! in some poor rhythmic period,  
Lady, I fain would tell how evermore  
Thy soul I know not from thy body, nor  
Thee from myself, neither our love from God.

Yea, in God's name, and Love's, and thine, would I  
Draw from one loving heart such evidence  
As to all hearts all things shall signify;  
Tender as dawn's first hill-fire, and intense  
As instantaneous penetrating sense,  
In Spring's birth-hour, of other Springs gone by.

Date: ?1871.

He wishes to tell how in love are mingled the physical, the spiritual, and the divine. He would make his love the sum and symbol of all loves.

Love in the individual, according to the rather obscure utterance of the sestet, or six concluding lines, stands a portion of the eternal love of the ages past and to come, a thing in which mortal worship of the best is signified and sublimated. The reading of the octave is simple. In the attempt to analyze love, and to separate what is earthly from what is heavenly, there is in Rossetti's idea profanity. Soul and body the woman beloved and responsive becomes a part of the man. The twain are one, and the love which binds them is the one Divine effluence not to be distinguished from Divinity (Knight, pp. 163 f.).

The sonnet is not one of the best. The figure of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea is infelicitous; "dawn's first hill-fire" is conceitistic; and the last lines, though not verging on bathos, as William Sharp thought, are perhaps hardly successful in conveying the persuasive sense of infinite past time concentrated in spring days. The close of the octave is notable as a statement of Rossetti's sensuousness; the same idea as that in "Love-Lily,"—

Whose speech Truth knows not from her thought  
Nor Love her body from her soul.

In Rossetti, one feels, this is at the same time a mystical expression and also a simple fact.

At one time Rossetti planned to place this sonnet first in the series.

VI (IV, 1870)

*The Kiss*

WHAT smouldering senses in death's sick delay  
Or seizure of malign vicissitude  
Can rob this body of honour, or denude  
This soul of wedding-raiment worn to-day?  
For lo! even now my lady's lips did play  
With these my lips such consonant interlude  
As laurelled Orpheus longed for when he wooed  
The half-drawn hungering face with that last lay.

I was a child beneath her touch, — a man  
When breast to breast we clung, even I and she, —  
A spirit when her spirit looked through me, —  
A god when all our life-breath met to fan  
Our life-blood, till love's emulous ardours ran,  
Fire within fire, desire in deity.

Date: ?1853-62 (Tisdell); a companion piece to VIa and possibly written at the same time.

The octave is seriously marred by over-elaboration of phrase and idea (*e. g.*, lines 2, 5-6) though the last line is admirable. But the sestet rises to a splendid climax — a sheer ecstasy of sex in language that is truly super-sensuous.<sup>1</sup> These lines might, in fact, be a test for those

<sup>1</sup> For myself, I find it quite as "objectionable" as the rejected "Nuptial Sleep"; certainly as vivid and "suggestive."

who are willing — or unwilling — to admit the propriety of such subject-matter in art.

The sense of the whole sonnet is: No illness or misfortune can lessen or weaken the glory of that kiss, a sacred union of body and soul.

In line 8 "that" is the Latin *ille*. "Desire in deity" (l. 14) seems to mean desire carried to its highest manifestation, or as W. M. R. puts it: "The fruition already of all possible desire" (*R. D. W.*, p. 189).

[VIa] (v, 1870)

### *Nuptial Sleep*

AT length their long kiss severed, with sweet smart:

And as the last slow sudden drops are shed

From sparkling eaves when all the storm has fled,  
So singly flagged the pulses of each heart.

Their bosoms sundered, with the opening start

Of married flowers to either side outspread

From the knit stem; yet still their mouths, burnt red,  
Fawned on each other where they lay apart.

Sleep sank them lower than the tide of dreams,

And their dreams watched them sink, and slid away.  
Slowly their souls swam up again, through gleams

Of watered light and dull drowned waifs of day;  
Till from some wonder of new woods and streams  
He woke, and wondered more: for there she lay.

Date: ?1868 (*R. D. W.*); ?1853-62 (Tisdell).

This sonnet, earlier called "Placata Venere," is a continuation of "The Kiss" and is closely related also to

VII. It was a sort of centre or symbol of the Fleshly controversy and was omitted by Rossetti from the completed "House of Life" in 1881.<sup>1</sup> In fact, it was not admitted into the earlier publication without some hesitation.<sup>2</sup> It pictures the two lovers in sexual exhaustion sinking into a dreamless sleep; then their souls swim slowly up through the "tide of dreams" until he wakes and marvels to find it reality: "for there she lay."

Certainly there can be no question of any improper motive on Rossetti's part in writing or publishing work of this kind. "To the last," says William Sharp, he maintained, what was indeed the case, that [the fleshly sonnets] were written out of no mere physical emotion and with no irreverence; that, personally speaking, he would never have withdrawn them from the . . . *House of Life*, but that . . . finding that to the body of these readers certain passages were stumbling-blocks not so much because of immorality as what seemed an unpleasant excess of realism of a kind *not* suitable for an indiscriminate audience . . . (p. 413).

Rossetti himself described the sonnet as "embodying, for its small constituent share [in the whole sequence], a beauty of natural universal function, only to be reprobated in art if dwelt on (as I have shown that it is not here) to the exclusion of those other highest things of which it is the harmonious concomitant"—"The Stealthy School," in *Collected Works*, i, 482. This is, in truth, all that need be said. Those who care to do so may certainly deny the validity of Rossetti's position, but the point is not one for argument.

<sup>1</sup> It was not cancelled, however, until after the sixth printing of the 1870 volume, in 1872. It was restored by W. M. R. in 1904. "The chief objection," said Knight (p. 164) somewhat surprisingly, "seems to lie in the use of the word 'fawned' as applied to the mouths of the lovers."

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Rossetti Papers*, pp. 455 f.



And therefore, who-so list it nat y-heere,  
 Turne over the leef and chese another tale;  
 For he shal fynde ynowe.

On the general subject of Fleshliness see section V of the Introduction, above.

## VII (VI, 1870)

### *Supreme Surrender*

To all the spirits of Love that wander by  
 Along his love-sown harvest-field of sleep  
 My Lady lies apparent; and the deep  
 Calls to the deep; and no man sees but I.  
 The bliss so long afar, at length so nigh,  
 Rests there attained. Methinks proud Love must  
     weep  
 When Fate's control doth from his harvest reap  
 The sacred hour for which the years did sigh.  
 First touched, the hand now warm around my neck  
     Taught memory long to mock desire: and lo!  
 Across my breast the abandoned hair doth flow,  
 Where one shorn tress long stirred the longing ache:  
 And next the heart that trembled for its sake  
     Lies the queen-heart in sovereign overthrow.

Date: ?1869-70; ?1853-62 (Tisdell).

This follows immediately upon "Nuptial Sleep" (or, in the later version, "The Kiss"): his long-awaited bliss attained, beside him lies the Beloved visible to the "spirits of love" who pass by in the harvest-field (1870: *fallowfield* — a superior reading, as Sharp says) of sleep,

but visible to no other. He reflects that proud Love must weep at the victory he himself has won. Then (in the sestet) he recalls the past when he had but touched her hand, and when he had but a lock of the hair that now lies "abandoned" across his breast, and when his heart beat trembling for hers that now lies subdued beside his own.

"And the deep Calls to the deep" (cf. Tennyson's "From the great deep to the great deep") seems to indicate the profound presence of Love's spiritual influences; or may refer more directly to the "tide of dreams" in "Nuptial Sleep."

William Sharp somewhat overpraises the sonnet for its "splendid emotional music." But after the two preceding it is rather an anticlimax. Though unobjectionable enough on mere moral grounds (Professor Tisdell regards it as "perhaps over-voluptuous"), its subject — pride and satisfaction in the enjoyment of his Beloved — can hardly be regarded as elevated or elevating, unless accompanied, as in "The Stream's Secret," by —

Yet most with the sweet soul  
Shall Love's espousals then be knit.

It is possible to find in the sestet a different meaning from that just given. The "one shorn tress" may be that of his dead wife which we know he cherished (cf. below, on XXXVI) and the "queen-heart" may stand for the innominate Other Beloved or another. In which case the date would be later than that assigned by Professor Tisdell.<sup>1</sup> Yet, as in so many other sonnets, the statement is too general to warrant a very precise biographical interpretation.

<sup>1</sup> The sonnet is one of those added in 1869-70, after the exhumation of the manuscript in Mrs. Rossetti's coffin; some of which were probably from that manuscript, others not. See Appendix I.

## VIII (vii, 1870)

*Love's Lovers*

SOME ladies love the jewels in Love's zone,  
And gold-tipped darts he hath for painless play  
In idle scornful hours he flings away;  
And some that listen to his lute's soft tone  
Do love to vaunt the silver praise their own;  
Some prize his blindfold sight; and there be they  
Who kissed his wings which brought him yesterday  
And thank his wings to-day that he is flown.

My lady only loves the heart of Love:  
Therefore Love's heart, my lady, hath for thee  
His bower of unimagined flower and tree:  
There kneels he now, and all-anhungered of  
Thine eyes gray-lit in shadowing hair above,  
Seals with thy mouth his immortality.

Date: ?1853-62 (Tisdell).

"A contrast between the frivolous or self-seeking views of love taken by various women, and the sentiment of love entertained by the Beloved Lady of the Poet" (*R. D. W.*, p. 189).

Some women care only for the superficial pleasures of love — its opportunities for display, its flirtations, its interesting surprises, its very transience and inconstancy, — but my Lady cares only for Love's true heart. And therefore Love opens for her his beautiful bower . . . and is himself there immortalized by her!

The sonnet is much too labored and artificial. This and IX Buchanan regarded as "meaningless, but in the best manner of Carew and Donne" (p. 60).

## IX (VIII, 1870)

*Passion and Worship*

ONE flame-winged brought a white-winged harp-player  
 Even where my lady and I lay all alone;  
 Saying: "Behold, this minstrel is unknown;  
 Bid him depart, for I am minstrel here:  
 Only my strains are to Love's dear ones dear."  
 Then said I: "Through thine hautboy's rapturous tone  
 Unto my lady still this harp makes moan,  
 And still she deems the cadence deep and clear."

Then said my lady: "Thou art Passion of Love,  
 And this Love's Worship: both he plights to me.  
 Thy mastering music walks the sunlit sea:  
 But where wan water trembles in the grove  
 And the wan moon is all the light thereof,  
 This harp still makes my name its voluntary."

Date: ?1868-70 (Tisdell).

The general meaning is: My lady enjoys and appreciates both fleshly passion and spiritual worship. W. M. R. explains thus:

When love has passed from the state of desire to the stage of fruition or possession, and when passion is the dominant emotion, that feeling of lowly homage which characterized the earlier stage of love still continues to subsist; it has its place, though it has become secondary to passion (*R. D. W.*, pp. 190 f.).

The word *secondary* here must not be misunderstood.

The sonnet, though elaborate and highly mannered is characteristic and must be accepted as an integral part of the scheme of the sequence.

While he and his lady were lying alone, there came to them two beings: one, "flame-winged" Passion, playing a hautboy, the other, "white-winged" Worship, playing a harp. Passion said: "I am minstrel here; bid the other depart." To which the Poet replied: "My lady still hears the deep clear cadences <sup>1</sup> of the harp (Worship) as a kind of accompaniment to the hautboy's (Passion's) rapturous music." Then said the lady: "My lover (or Love) gives me both — Passion with its great overmastering power, and Worship with its gift of quietness."

The only difficulty is in the sestet, where Rossetti first combines an auditory with a visual image, and then substitutes a picture for an emotion. The mastering music of Passion walking the sunlit sea stands for the transcendent power of Passion, mighty as the ocean; "sunlit" brightens the picture but adds little to the meaning, though the contrast with "wan water" is obvious. The picture,—

But where wan water trembles in the grove  
And the wan moon is all the light thereof,—

is to represent an emotional state: when she withdraws into the innermost seclusion and dim recesses of her soul. Passion — yes; but underneath, in her heart of hearts, the music of Worship is sweeter.

The wresting of accent in "harp-player" (l. 1) and "voluntary" (l. 14) will be regarded by some as a beautiful flaw, by others as affectation or carelessness. For Rossetti it is of course deliberate, and perhaps is intended to heighten the artificial effect of the sonnet.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I take "makes moan" as a rather colorless phrase for "sounds," "makes low-toned music."

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix II.

## X (IX, 1870)

*The Portrait*

O LORD of all compassionate control,  
O Love! let this my lady's picture glow  
Under my hand to praise her name, and show  
Even of her inner self the perfect whole:  
That he who seeks her beauty's furthest goal,  
Beyond the light that the sweet glances throw  
And reflux wave of the sweet smile, may know  
The very sky and sea-line of her soul.

Lo! it is done. Above the enthroning throat  
The mouth's mould testifies of voice and kiss,  
The shadowed eyes remember and foresee.  
Her face is made her shrine. Let all men note  
That in all years (O Love, thy gift is this!)  
They that would look on her must come to me.

Date: ?1860-61 (Tisdell); ?1863-66; about 1868 (Page).  
He prays that his portrait of her may represent her  
very soul for all time.

O compassionate Lord of Love, let this my portrait of her  
reveal her complete inner self, so that whoever shall seek to  
know her after the light of her eyes is gone and the wave of her  
smile has ebbed, may know the utmost reaches of her soul. —  
Lo! it is done. Above the throne of her throat <sup>1</sup> is her mouth,

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<sup>1</sup> "Columnar throat" paraphrases W. M. R.; in 1870: *long lithe throat*, which perhaps seemed too realistic. "Thy neck is as a tower of ivory," said Solomon; but the modern mind, accustomed to complete visualization, has difficulty with such tropes. It is necessary only to remember that a single aspect of the image is to be considered.

memorial of her voice and her kisses, and her shadowed eyes that "remember and foresee." Her picture is a shrine to her, whither all must come who would see her.

The interest of the sonnet is apparently its poignant personal expression. But it is not without blemishes, — such as the almost meaningless "control," the "refluent wave" conceit, and the Germanic "sky- and sea-line." Extraordinarily fine, however, is the eleventh line.

There is no direct evidence for the date of the sonnet,<sup>1</sup> and none for associating it with the famous "Beata Beatrix," begun in 1863, after Mrs. Rossetti's death. But the spirit and feeling of both sonnet and painting are the same, and one can scarcely resist putting them together. For the picture see Marillier, pp. 126 f. and Sharp, pp. 183 ff. On the other hand, Stephens (p. 173) says: "It has sometimes appeared to me that the ardent sonnet he called *The Portrait* referred, however generally, yet chiefly to her [Alexa Wilding]. . . . Did ever lover, poet, and painter write of his mistress more finely than this?" Stephens's is good testimony and not lightly to be disregarded. On Miss Wilding see below, no. LXXVII.

The sonnet may also be compared with the early (later, much revised) poem of the same title, *Collected Works*, i, 240, but they have little in common.

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix 1.



## XI (x, 1870)

*The Love-Letter*

WARMED by her hand and shadowed by her hair  
As close she leaned and poured her heart through  
thee,  
Whereof the articulate throbs accompany  
The smooth black stream that makes thy whiteness  
fair, —  
Sweet fluttering sheet, even of her breath aware, —  
Oh let thy silent song disclose to me  
That soul wherewith her lips and eyes agree  
Like married music in Love's answering air.

Fain had I watched her when, at some fond thought,  
Her bosom to the writing closelier press'd,  
And her breast's secrets peered into her breast;  
When, through eyes raised an instant, her soul sought  
My soul and from the sudden confluence caught  
The words that made her love the loveliest.

Date: ?1853-62 (Tisdell).

Personal, like the preceding, but conceitistic and inferior; "one of the most gracious of the series," says Knight (p. 167), but "marred by a conceit worthy of the days of Donne if not Lyly or Marino."

He addresses her letter: it is warmed by her hand and shadowed by her hair, and the "smoothe black stream" that beautifies its whiteness gives back in articulate language the throbbing of her heart; it is even aware of her breath. He prays that it may disclose her soul to him —

her soul that matches her lips and eyes as an accompaniment matches a melody of love.<sup>1</sup> He wishes he might have looked on while her bosom leaned close against the paper and she lifted her eyes as instant to gaze into his (absent) eyes.<sup>2</sup>

Line 11 is a good example of the straining for intensity and concentration resulting nearly in nonsense. The fourth line is in the worst seventeenth-century taste; on a level with the youthful Milton's

For sure so well instructed are my tears  
That they would fitly fall in ordered characters,<sup>3</sup>

and the dreadful parallels in William Browne and Crashaw. Indeed, Rossetti's kinship with the spirit of Marinism is obvious elsewhere.

## XII

### *The Lovers' Walk*

SWEET twining hedgeflowers wind-stirred in no wise  
On this June day; and hand that clings in hand: —  
Still glades; and meeting faces scarcely fann'd: —  
An osier-odoured stream that draws the skies  
Deep to its heart; and mirrored eyes in eyes: —  
Fresh hourly wonder o'er the Summer land  
Of light and cloud; and two souls softly spann'd  
With one o'erarching heaven of smiles and sighs: —

<sup>1</sup> Or, as W. M. R. understands it, "like blended notes of music in the vibrating air of love" (*R. D. W.*, p. 192).

<sup>2</sup> The picture in the sestet suggests remotely Rossetti's various sketches and paintings of the Blessed Damozel leaning on the bar of heaven.

<sup>3</sup> *The Passion.*

Even such their path, whose bodies lean unto  
Each other's visible sweetness amorously, —  
Whose passionate hearts lean by Love's high decree  
Together on his heart for ever true,  
As the cloud-foaming firmamental blue  
Rests on the blue line of a foamless sea.

Date: 1871, Kelmscott (Scott, ii, p. 142). Cf. XXII, XXXIV, XLI.

The octave presents a simple picture of two lovers beside a stream in the heavy warm stillness of a June day. It is rather a painter's than a poet's picture, but a painter's who is remembering and imagining, not "copying" natural details. The sestet replaces this picture by a non-visual image of the lovers' hearts leaning together upon the heart of Love as the sky rests upon the sea — still another picture directed to the abstract imagination, and added, not in order to complete the preceding one, but in order to make it even less concrete, at the same time adding both largeness and beauty. This sort of architectonics is not difficult to understand, but its appeal is to a rather limited and highly cultivated taste, for it verges on the artificial.

W. M. R. notes that "each detail of natural scenery is coupled with a somewhat analogous detail indicating the emotions of the lovers" (*R. D. W.*, p. 193). The last two lines are exceptionally vivid, though "firmamental blue" is questionable, and "cloud-foaming" is perhaps dangerous, yet effective when contrasted with "foamless" sea. Not much can be said for "osier-odoured stream"; one recalls Enoch Arden's "ocean-smelling osier."

## XIII

*Youth's Antiphony*

"I LOVE you, sweet: how can you ever learn  
 How much I love you?" "You I love even so,  
 And so I learn it." "Sweet, you cannot know  
 How fair you are." "If fair enough to earn  
 Your love, so much is all my love's concern."  
 "My love grows hourly, sweet." "Mine too doth  
 grow,  
 Yet love seemed full so many hours ago!"  
 Thus lovers speak, till kisses claim their turn.

Ah! happy they to whom such words as these  
 In youth have served for speech the whole day long,  
 Hour after hour, remote from the world's throng,  
 Work, contest, fame, all life's confederate pleas, —  
 What while Love breathed in sighs and silences  
 Through two blent souls one rapturous undersong.

Date: ?1871.

In the octave, the light prattle of two lovers — rather too "sweet." In the sestet: how happy are lovers who prattle thus, remote from all the other interests of life.

In ll. 4-5 there is an interesting metrical variation:

If fair enough to earn Your love,  
 So much is all my love's concern.

In l. 13 "what while" is an unpleasant Latinism.

## XIV

*Youth's Spring-Tribute*

ON this sweet bank your head thrice sweet and dear  
I lay, and spread your hair on either side,  
And see the newborn woodflowers bashful-eyed  
Look through the golden tresses here and there.  
On these debateable borders of the year  
Spring's foot half falters; scarce she yet may know  
The leafless blackthorn-blossom from the snow;  
And through her bowers the wind's way still is clear.

But April's sun strikes down the glades to-day;  
So shut your eyes upturned, and feel my kiss  
Creep, as the Spring now thrills through every spray,  
Up your warm throat to your warm lips: for this  
Is even the hour of Love's sworn suit-service,  
With whom cold hearts are counted castaway.

Date: Probably April, 1870 (Page).

The second quatrain is as pure poetry as Rossetti has written anywhere. The first (especially l. 2) is perhaps a little too sensuous; and the sestet is "fleshly" to the last degree. But if verse is to be judged by its achievement of a mood, no one can doubt the success of this sonnet. The metrical emphasis on "Creep" intensifies the whole effect. "Suit-service" riming to "kiss" is doubtful, but of course deliberate.

That the Spring-Tribute of youth to love is an hour of passion is unmistakable.

## XV (XI, 1870)

*The Birth-Bond*

HAVE you not noted, in some family  
Where two were born of a first marriage-bed,  
How still they own their gracious bond, though fed  
And nursed on the forgotten breast and knee? —  
How to their father's children they shall be  
In act and thought of one goodwill; but each  
Shall for the other have, in silence speech,  
And in a word complete community?

Even so, when first I saw you, seemed it, love,  
That among souls allied to mine was yet  
One nearer kindred than life hinted of.  
O born with me somewhere that men forget,  
And though in years of sight and sound unmet,  
Known for my soul's birth-partner well enough!

Date: 1854 (*Letters to Allingham*, p. 46).

"The Lover and his Beloved have a closer bond of spiritual affinity than either of them can possibly have with any one else" (*R. D. W.*, p. 194).

A man has two children by his first wife; then when she dies, he marries again and has more children. Though affectionate enough with their half-brothers and sisters, the first two are much closer to each other than to the others. Similarly, even when he first saw her, he felt that she was more nearly allied to him than his own blood-relatives. In truth, they two had been brother and sister in some previous life.

The idea, being too complicated for a sonnet, suffers from condensation. Noteworthy, however, is Rossetti's apparent belief in prenatal existence, in a spirit-world that is not one "of sight and sound." Apropos, Lafcadio Hearn commented to his Japanese students:

This beautiful thought of love is almost exactly the same as that suggested in a well-known Japanese proverb about the relations of a previous existence. We have here, in an English poet, who very probably never read anything about Buddhism the very idea of the Buddhist *en*. The whole tendency of the poet's mind was toward larger things than his early training had prepared him for (*Pre-Raphaelite and Other Poets*, p. 14.)

## XVI (xii, 1870)

### *A Day of Love*

THOSE envied places which do know her well,  
And are so scornful of this lonely place,  
Even now for once are emptied of her grace:  
Nowhere but here she is: and while Love's spell  
From his predominant presence doth compel  
All alien hours, an outworn populace,  
The hours of Love fill full the echoing space  
With sweet confederate music favourable.

Now many memories make solicitous  
The delicate love-lines of her mouth, lit  
With quivering fire, the words take wing from it;  
As here between our kisses we sit thus  
Speaking of things remembered, and so sit  
Speechless while things forgotten call to us.



Date: ?1864-68; ?1853-62 (Tisdell)

This is an excellent example of the elaborate, heavy-wrought style, perfectly sustained, and perfectly justified because such is the only way of expressing what he has to say.

Those places which are so familiar (and on that account are envied by me) and so scornful of this place of mine (which is usually lonely because she is not here), are now, for once, deprived of her favor: she is here and here only. Now Love is with me and by his dominant power drives away all other thoughts and interests as alien and worthless; Love sweet and enjoyable occupies me completely.

The literal meaning of the sestet need not, perhaps, be pressed too far. Now they are together, after a separation; her lips crave his and they abandon speech for kisses.<sup>1</sup> Thus they sit, now speaking of things remembered, now speechless, while the world they have forgotten calls to them unheard.

While there is no documentary evidence either way, I incline to believe this has reference to the *Innominata*. The whole sonnet seems to describe a day of love which is exceptional, not a mere reunion of parted lovers. The things momentarily forgotten, which nevertheless call to them (l. 14), may well be specific, not general. It should be noted, moreover, that in a strictly chronological arrangement this, as a sonnet of wooing, should precede those of surrender — unless it signifies a new wooing.

<sup>1</sup> Or, more simply, perhaps: she speaks flaming words of love to him. Buchanan grouped this sonnet with *xxi*, *xxiii*, *xxv*, *xxxvi*, *xxxvii*, *xxxviii*, *xxxix*, *xl* (which were a consecutive series, *xii-xx*, in the 1870 version) as "one profuse sweat of animalism" (p. 60). But then he regarded the whole 1870 "House of Life" as "a very hotbed of nasty phrases" (p. 53).

## XVII

*Beauty's Pageant*

WHAT dawn-pulse at the heart of heaven, or last  
 Incarnate flower of culminating day, —  
 What marshalled marvels on the skirts of May,  
 Or song full-quired, sweet June's encomiast;  
 What glory of change by nature's hand amass'd  
 Can vie with all those moods of varying grace  
 Which o'er one loveliest woman's form and face  
 Within this hour, within this room, have pass'd?

Love's very vesture and elect disguise  
 Was each fine movement, — wonder new-begot  
 Of lily or swan or swan-stemmed galiot;  
 Joy to his sight who now the sadlier sighs,  
 Parted again; and sorrow yet for eyes  
 Unborn, that read these words and saw her not.

Date: ?1871.

Her varying moods of an hour surpass the changes of  
 Nature's moods of beauty.

What dawn, what sunset, what marvels of May, what song  
 of birds in June, — what changes in nature's beauty can vie  
 with all the various beauties of her form and face in this one  
 hour, in this one room? Her every motion reflected love and  
 every motion was a fresh marvel of beauty, now of a lily, now  
 of a swan, now of a ship with swanlike prow. She was a joy to  
 his eyes who now is parted from her; and a sorrow too for the  
 eyes of those who could never see her, but must know her only  
 through these words of mine.

The idea (of the sestet particularly) is a quaint affec-  
 tion (William Sharp), playful rather than profound,

and in the close, Shakespearean. The connection between octave and sestet is not obvious. Through l. 11 the meaning is clear enough: the various beauties of her moods and movements — that is, the pageantry of her beauty; then comes the reminiscent sadness because he no longer sees that pageantry.

The whole sonnet is too formal to bear a special reference to Mrs. Rossetti, though the last lines are readily construed to mean the final parting of death. But "Parted *again*" (l. 13) may be no more than a connective with the preceding sonnet.

## XVIII

*Genius in Beauty*

BEAUTY like hers is genius. Not the call  
 Of Homer's or of Dante's heart sublime, —  
 Not Michael's hand furrowing the zones of time, —  
 Is more with compassed mysteries musical;  
 Nay, not in Spring's or Summer's sweet footfall  
 More gathered gifts exuberant Life bequeaths  
 Than doth this sovereign face, whose love-spell  
 breathes

Even from its shadowed contour on the wall.

As many men are poets in their youth,  
 But for one sweet-strung soul the wires prolong  
 Even through all change the indomitable song;  
 So in likewise the envenomed years, whose tooth  
 Rends shallower grace with ruin void of ruth,  
 Upon this beauty's power shall wreak no wrong.

Date: ?1871.

Beauty like hers is a kind of genius — a mysterious quality like the sublimity of Homer or Dante or Michelangelo. Life itself in the exuberance of Spring or Summer does not offer us greater riches than are ours at the sight of her face — even her shadow on the wall breathes a love-spell. — Many a man is a poet in his youth; but when he grows older the strings of his lute (or heart, or musical instrument unnamed) vibrate sympathetically only with the strings of another soul in tune with his through love. Similarly the future, whose envenomed tooth ruthlessly devours beauty that is less deep than hers, shall not injure her loveliness.

That is, just as a man's poetic feeling survives, for one woman, beyond the effervescence of youth, so her beauty will survive the destructive power of time and change. The octave celebrates the richness of her beauty, the sestet its imperishability. It is, like genius, immortal. The idea is a commonplace among sonnet-eers; yet the expression is sufficiently Rossetti's own.

## XIX

### *Silent Noon*

YOUR hands lie open in the long fresh grass, —  
The finger-points look through like rosy blooms:  
Your eyes smile peace. The pasture gleams and  
glooms  
'Neath billowing skies that scatter and amass.  
All round our nest, far as the eye can pass,  
Are golden kingcup-fields with silver edge  
Where the cow-parsley skirts the hawthorn-hedge.  
'T is visible silence, still as the hour-glass.

Deep in the sun-searched growths the dragon-fly  
Hangs like a blue thread loosened from the sky: —

So this wing'd hour is dropt to us from above.  
Oh! clasp we to our hearts, for deathless dower,  
This close-companioned inarticulate hour  
When twofold silence was the song of love.

Date: ?1871.

“One of the most beautiful natural utterances of Rossetti,” says William Sharp; but inferior in this respect, I think, to LXIX. It is somewhat crowded and on the verge of being overwrought. Compare XII. The comparison of the lady’s finger-tips to rose-buds and of the dragon-fly to a blue thread loosened from the texture of the sky belongs to the Marinistic school; or, in Coleridgean terms: fancy, not imagination.

## XX

### *Gracious Moonlight*

EVEN as the moon grows queenlier in mid-space  
When the sky darkens, and her cloud-rapt car  
Thrills with intenser radiance from afar, —  
So lambent, lady, beams thy sovereign grace  
When the drear soul desires thee. Of that face  
What shall be said, — which, like a governing star,  
Gathers and garners from all things that are  
Their silent penetrative loveliness?

O'er water-daisies and wild waifs of Spring,  
There where the iris rears its gold-crowned sheaf  
With flowering rush and sceptred arrow-leaf,

So have I marked Queen Dian, in bright ring  
Of cloud above and wave below, take wing  
And chase night's gloom, as thou the spirit's grief.

Date: ?1871.

You lighten my grief as the moon lights the night.

Just as the moon becomes more beautiful ("queenlier") when the sky darkens and its light, from the distant sun, seems intenser in contrast with the surrounding darkness, so [more] brightly shines thy beauty, lady, when my soul, desiring thee, is darkened with sadness. Thy face is like a governing star (that is, the sun), which controls the moon and all the stars; and, like the sun, gathers and retains all the loveliness of all things.<sup>1</sup> (Or, more simply, thy face combines all the beauty of the world.)

The sestet returns to the comparison with which the sonnet opens. He said at first: "As the moon seems brighter when surrounded with clouds, so thy beauty seems brighter when I am melancholy." Now he develops this, adding: "Thou drivest away my spirit's grief just as the moon, breaking through the ring of clouds, drives away the gloom of night." The first tercet simply enlarges the picture.

"Queen Dian" and "cloud-rapt car" (the latter is perilously near being a pun) are only exaggerated signposts of the overlabored stiltedness of the whole. Yet the whole is "saved," certainly, by the last lines of the octave and the picture that opens the sestet.

We know nothing definite of the date at which this sonnet was composed, but its general meaning leads one to infer that the lady is his new second love.

<sup>1</sup> I am not at all sure about this. Perhaps the governing star is the moon (in which case the unity of the sonnet would be improved); but neither the sun nor the moon can be said to gather and garner all loveliness — except poetically speaking. Perhaps there is some astrological notion in the background.

## XXI (xiii, 1870)

*Love-Sweetness*

SWEET dimness of her loosened hair's downfall  
About thy face; her sweet hands round thy head  
In gracious fostering union garlanded;  
Her tremulous smiles; her glances' sweet recall  
Of love; her murmuring sighs memorial;  
Her mouth's culled sweetness by thy kisses shed  
On cheeks and neck and eyelids, and so led  
Back to her mouth which answers there for all: —  
What sweeter than these things, except the thing  
In lacking which all these would lose their sweet: —  
The confident heart's still fervour: the swift beat  
And soft subsidence of the spirit's wing,  
Then when it feels, in cloud-girt wayfaring,  
The breath of kindred plumes against its feet?

Date: ?1853-62 (Tisdell).

Here [said Rossetti] all the passionate and just delights of the body are declared — somewhat figuratively, it is true, but unmistakably — to be naught if not ennobled by the concurrence of the soul at all times ("The Stealthy School," in *Collected Works*, i, 482).

The poet addresses himself: sweeter (he says) than her caresses is my confidence in her love and the communion of our spirits (souls).

Sweet is the dimness of her hair fallen about my face; her hands encircling my head; her smiles; her glances and her sighs, reminiscent of love; her kisses, which are a kind of concentrated sum-total of all mine upon her cheeks, neck, and



eyelids. Nothing could be sweeter than all these, — except that which, if lacking, would make all these empty and meaningless, namely, the quiet fervor of my confident heart and the vibrant recognition of our two kindred souls as they meet in this “cloud-girt” life.

There is no difficulty here except in the last few lines.

It necessitates some effort on the part of the reader to realize at once, on having apprehended “the confident heart’s still fervor,” the image of a human spirit, weary “in cloud-girt wayfaring,” suddenly ceasing in solitary flight when it feels against its feet “the breath of kindred plumes” — in simpler terms, the sudden union of a soul that has remained in solitary expectancy till the twin-soul that was dearest to it on earth is suddenly released from its bodily environment. [This last is, I believe, quite wrong.] Both the idea and the lines expressing it are beautiful, yet the poet’s absorption is so great that he forgets the reader’s possible incapacity to keep mental pace with him without warning; and though the lines are not obscure, they are so worded that a vague uncertainty akin to the effect produced by obscurity is apt to be the result” (Sharp, pp. 422 f.).

The reader’s possible incapacity meets its severest test in filling out the spirit picture, being given only the wings and the feet. Once that is achieved, the rest is not very troublesome; and the result is very characteristic of Rossetti’s methods.

Among the souls or winged spirits that are moving through the clouded ways of existence, suddenly one feels against its feet — why *feet*? — rime? — fanned by the wings of another which it recognizes as its mate or kin; its own wings suddenly beat more swiftly (at the surprise), and then gently subside (with quiet calm and satisfaction).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This spelling the word out to the last syllable may be painful, but it is almost necessary if one is to follow up the picture beyond a “vague uncertainty.”

Professor Tisdell finds the octave "exceedingly sensuous, but the fine image of the sestet lifts the sonnet above the merely sensual" (p. 272). Knight puts the same view rather better: it "stands conspicuous by its avowed preference for 'the confident heart's still fervour,' over . . . all the fragrant perfections of bodily presence on which the poet dwells" (p. 169).

## XXII

*Heart's Haven*

SOMETIMES she is a child within mine arms,  
    Cowering beneath dark wings that love must chase,—  
    With still tears showering and averted face,  
Inexplicably filled with faint alarms:  
And oft from mine own spirit's hurtling harms  
    I crave the refuge of her deep embrace, —  
    Against all ills the fortified strong place  
And sweet reserve of sovereign counter-charms.  
  
And Love, our light at night and shade at noon,  
    Lulls us to rest with songs, and turns away  
    All shafts of shelterless tumultuous day.  
Like the moon's growth, his face gleams through his  
    tune;  
And as soft waters warble to the moon,  
    Our answering spirits chime one roundelay.

Date: 1871, Kelmscott (Scott, ii, 142).

They comfort each other, each by protecting the other from the sorrows and hurts of life; she coming to him as to a father, he to her as to a protector (her em-

brace is at once a fortified store-house and a garden-close filled with weapons against the sorrows and hurts). — This is again, like the ending of XXI, an image that hardly bears prosaic examination without undue loss. The two pictures will not fuse except in the sublimating heat of intense abstract imagination; and about all one can say is that those who do not apply this heat will miss one of the greatest peculiarities of Rossetti's poetry. One may call it precious or affected and dismiss it, or comprehend it and accept it.

The sestet carries forward the same thought, with the familiar personification of Love. Noteworthy here is the condensed simile of l. 12: Love's face, his presence, is seen or felt through his song as the old moon is visible in the new moon's "arms."

### XXIII (xiv, 1870)

#### *Love's Baubles*

I STOOD where Love in brimming armfuls bore  
Slight wanton flowers and foolish toys of fruit:  
And round him ladies thronged in warm pursuit,  
Fingered and lipped and proffered the strange store.  
And from one hand the petal and the core  
Savoured of sleep; and cluster and curled shoot  
Seemed from another hand like shame's salute, —  
Gifts that I felt my cheek was blushing for.

At last Love bade my Lady give the same:  
And as I looked, the dew was light thereon;  
And as I took them, at her touch they shone

With inmost heaven-hue of the heart of flame.

And then Love said: "Lo! when the hand is hers,  
Follies of love are love's true ministers."

Date: ?1868-70 (Tisdell).

Love's follies or fleshly attributes become precious  
and sanctified in her and by her.

The wanton flowers and foolish enjoyments of love are offered him by various ladies; and from one in particular these follies seem to him a mere narcotic (both petal and core, that is, both in playful beginning and in final fruition), from another downright shame — though he was not undesirous of them. But these same gifts (flowers, follies) offered by his beloved are purified as with morning dew, they shine like the clear blue of heaven.<sup>1</sup>

The sonnet is plainly a generalized statement and ought not to be taken autobiographically.

## XXIV

### *Pride of Youth*

EVEN as a child, of sorrow that we give  
The dead, but little in his heart can find,  
Since without need of thought to his clear mind  
Their turn it is to die and his to live: —  
Even so the winged New Love smiles to receive  
Along his eddying plumes the auroral wind,  
Nor, forward glorying, casts one look behind  
Where night-rack shrouds the Old Love fugitive.

<sup>1</sup> "Heart of flame" must mean a sky-blue often visible in the centre of a flame. The painter's eye would have noted this.

There is a change in every hour's recall,  
And the last cowslip in the fields we see  
On the same day with the first corn-poppy.  
Alas for hourly change! Alas for all  
The loves that from his hand proud Youth lets fall,  
Even as the beads of a told rosary!

Date: 1880 (*R. D. W.*, p. 171; Caine, *Recollections*, pp. 254 f.). First published in the *Athenaeum*, September 3, 1881 (no. 2810), p. 305.

Youth proudly moves from one love to another, with no thought of the past.

Just as a child feels but little sorrow for the dead, since he knows intuitively that it is natural for him to live and for them to die; even so a new love enjoys its auroral existence and never thinks of the sorrow and pain of the old love it has driven out. Each hour of life brings its change; and in youth love follows love like "the beads of a told rosary."

## XXV (xv, 1870)

### *Winged Hours*

EACH hour until we meet is as a bird  
That wings from far his gradual way along  
The rustling covert of my soul, — his song  
Still loudlier trilled through leaves more deeply stirr'd:  
But at the hour of meeting, a clear word  
Is every note he sings, in Love's own tongue;  
Yet, Love, thou know'st the sweet strain suffers  
wrong,  
Full oft through our contending joys unheard.

What of that hour at last, when for her sake  
No wing may fly to me nor song may flow;  
When, wandering round my life unleaved, I know  
The bloodied feathers scattered in the brake,  
And think how she, far from me, with like eyes  
Sees through the untuneful bough the wingless skies?

Date: ?1868-69 (Tisdell).

Again the note of foreboding, first sounded in IV. Waiting for her . . . and the joy of meeting is sometimes marred . . . but what of the time when there shall be no more meetings?

Each hour until we meet is as a bird flying slowly through a rustling covert (which is my soul, my life), and as it draws nearer and its song becomes louder, my soul is the more deeply moved. When we meet, each note of its song is a word of love; and yet the music suffers, being often silenced by our contending emotions.<sup>1</sup>

The sestet pursues the metaphor quite literally. The rustling covert becomes "unleaved," the bird that came singing words of love is killed, and its "bloodied feathers" are scattered in the brake. But in spite of this the sonnet comes to a fine close, reminiscent of "The Blessed Damozel."

Autobiography is unmistakable here, but not unambiguous. Apparently the feeling is one of remorse for certain moments in his love and marriage, and the tragic circumstances of his wife's death. But if one look more closely, and consider the probable date, the sonnet seems rather to picture the poet's gloomy vision of his

<sup>1</sup> In 1870, "contending kisses"; later, "contending joys"; in either case "contending" may mean competitive, or contending with external circumstances.

barren future, when his beloved (not necessarily his wife) shall be separated from him, when they shall not be permitted to meet (ll. 9-10), and his whole life shall be frustrate.

## XXVI

*Mid-Rapture*

THOU lovely and beloved, thou my love;  
Whose kiss seems still the first; whose summoning  
eyes,  
Even now, as for our love-world's new sunrise,  
Shed very dawn; whose voice, attuned above  
All modulation of the deep-bowered dove,  
Is like a hand laid softly on the soul;  
Whose hand is like a sweet voice to control  
Those worn tired brows it hath the keeping of: —  
What word can answer to thy word, — what gaze  
To thine, which now absorbs within its sphere  
My worshiping face, till I am mirrored there  
Light-circled in a heaven of deep-drawn rays?  
What clasp, what kiss mine inmost heart can prove,  
O lovely and beloved, O my love?

Date: ?1871.

A pure lyric of rapture and adoration; "a passionate feeling that seems to create a sufficiency of the present unto itself" (Sharp, p. 423). It is Mid-Rapture since the love is no longer new, but midway between its beginning and — its end.



## XXVII

*Heart's Compass*

SOMETIMES thou seem'st not as thyself alone,  
But as the meaning of all things that are;  
A breathless wonder, shadowing forth afar  
Some heavenly solstice hushed and halcyon;  
Whose unstirred lips are music's visible tone;  
Whose eyes the sun-gate of the soul unbar,  
Being of its furthest fires oracular; —  
The evident heart of all life sown and mown.

Even such Love is; and is not thy name Love?  
Yea, by thy hand the Love-god rends apart  
All gathering clouds of Night's ambiguous art;  
Flings them far down, and sets thine eyes above;  
And simply, as some gage of flower or glove,  
Stakes with a smile the world against thy heart.

Date: ?1871.

"He places himself once more in the most spiritual of moods, to see his mistress the meaning of all beauty, and in so seeing, to liken her to Love, whose name she is" (Knight, p. 170).

In the octave he celebrates the infinite range of love manifested in her — the hidden meaning of all things, a breathless wonder foreshadowing the peace and calm of heaven; a wondrous being from whose motionless lips comes music visible, through whose eyes are seen the fiery depths of the soul; in a word, the very heart of all who have lived and died.

In the sestet he continues: By her hand Love has rent and dispersed the gathering clouds of his gloom; has set her eyes over him as a light through the darkness; and smiling, stakes the world, as if it were but a flower or a glove, against her heart; that is, values the whole world as a mere flower in comparison with her heart.

"The sun-gate of the soul" is puzzling. W. M. R. offers no help. At first it is a gate or entrance into the soul's fiery depths, her soul being imaged as a burning sun. Then when this gate into the sun has been opened by her eyes, the eyes themselves become oracles or revelations (either by reflection or by direct sight) of the inmost depths of her soul. In a word, her open eyes reveal the burning deeps of her soul.

"Night's ambiguous art," with its "gathering clouds," looks like a reference to the sinister effects of Rossetti's insomnia and consequent illness; but it may be only an elaborate phrase for the harshness of life. Certainly, the gathering clouds of Rossetti's life postdate 1862, and this love that rends them — idealized as it is — must be more than a memory of his first love.

## XXVIII

### *Soul-Light*

WHAT other woman could be loved like you,  
Or how of you should love possess his fill?  
After the fulness of all rapture, still, —  
As at the end of some deep avenue  
A tender glamour of day, — there comes to view  
Far in your eyes a yet more hungering thrill, —  
Such fire as Love's soul-winnowing hands distil  
Even from his inmost ark of light and dew.

And as the traveller triumphs with the sun,  
Glorying in heat's mid-height, yet startide brings  
Wonder new-born, and still fresh transport springs  
From limpid lambent hours of day begun; —  
Even so, through eyes and voice, your soul doth move  
My soul with changeful light of infinite love.

Date: ?1871.

Like XXVI, an expression of rapturous devotion.

Her love is inexhaustible. After the fullest measure of love has been enjoyed, there is still visible in her eyes — like the soft light of day seen down a long avenue of trees — a fire, a quintessence of light similar to the intense purple of the inner curve of the rainbow. As a traveler setting out in the limpid hours of dawn, after glorying in the heat of midday, arrives at his goal when the sun sets, and yet finds new beauty and joy in the starlight, even so does your soul, through your eyes and voice, fill my soul with the ever-changing life of love. (Your love has been dawn and noon and sunset and starlight to me — each with a new glory.)

“Love’s soul-winnowing hands” is again a stumbling block. But as in XXII, the difficulty lies in a combination of two disparate figures. One is of Love winnowing souls with his hands (not to be visualized too fully!) and so separating the perfect from the imperfect; the other is of the perfection of light distilled in the purple (or even ultra-violet?) of the rainbow. The nexus is the similar ideas of winnowing and distilling, both leading to a kind of perfection. This still leaves “inmost ark.” I follow W. M. R. in taking ark as arch; but there is inevitably a suggestion or overtone of ark in the Biblical sense.

The “woman” addressed is, by inference, the same as in the preceding sonnet.

## XXIX

*The Moonstar*

LADY, I thank thee for thy loveliness,  
Because my lady is more lovely still.  
Glorying I gaze, and yield with glad goodwill  
To thee thy tribute; by whose sweet-spun dress  
Of delicate life Love labours to assess  
My lady's absolute queendom; saying, "Lo!  
How high this beauty is, which yet doth show  
But as that beauty's sovereign votaress."

Lady, I saw thee with her, side by side;  
And as, when night's fair fires their queen surround,  
An emulous star too near the moon will ride, —  
Even so thy rays within her luminous bound  
Were traced no more; and by the light so drown'd,  
Lady, not thou but she was glorified.

Date: ?1871.

"Dantesque," weak, banal. He praises his lady by comparing her with another, who, though beautiful, was but as a star beside the moon.

## XXX

*Last Fire*

LOVE, through your spirit and mine what summer eve  
Now glows with glory of all things possess'd,  
Since this day's sun of rapture filled the west  
And the light sweetened as the fire took leave?

Awhile now softer let your bosom heave,  
As in Love's harbour, even that loving breast,  
All care takes refuge while we sink to rest,  
And mutual dreams the bygone bliss retrieve.

Many the days that Winter keeps in store,  
Sunless throughout, or whose brief sun-glimpses  
Scarce shed the heaped snow through the naked trees.  
This day at least was Summer's paramour,  
Sun-coloured to the imperishable core  
With sweet well-being of love and full heart's ease.

Date: ?1871.

Let us enjoy our love now, though winter has sunless days ahead. — He chooses a summer sunset as symbolic of the last fire of love, before the quiet sunless days of winter come. The description is "literary," the language conventional (except l. 13 and "sweetened" in l. 4), and the idea the old *carpe diem*.

### XXXI

#### *Her Gifts*

HIGH grace, the dower of queens; and therewithal  
Some wood-born wonder's sweet simplicity;  
A glance like water brimming with the sky  
Or hyacinth-light where forest-shadows fall;  
Such thrilling pallor of cheek as doth enthrall  
The heart; a mouth whose passionate forms imply  
All music and all silence held thereby;  
Deep golden locks, her sovereign coronal;

A round reared neck, meet column of Love's shrine  
 To cling to when the heart takes sanctuary;  
 Hands which for ever at Love's bidding be,  
 And soft-stirred feet still answering to his sign: —  
 These are her gifts, as tongue may tell them o'er.  
 Breathe low her name, my soul; for that means more.

Date: ?1871.

"One of the most beautiful, indeed, in the series of those that deal with love" (Sharp). "None of his poems is more eloquent in praise than this. Once more the ennobling touch comes after the record of physical and intellectual attraction. . . . Adoration can scarcely be expressed in language at once more vague if measured, yet more charged with expression and suggestion" (Knight, pp. 170-171).

With queenly grace, sweet natural simplicity, eyes limpid and blue as the sky, or purplish-blue like forest shadows, cheeks pale (but entralling the heart), passionate mouth implying all music and all silence, crown of golden hair, neck like the pedestal of Love's shrine,<sup>1</sup> hands and feet always obedient to love — such are her gifts.

Rossetti has the following analysis: "She is full of incidents like all beautiful nature. Then follow descriptive lines about her different attitudes, expressions, etc. Perhaps to wind up by saying that nothing one can say is so expressive of her as her own name, which means herself only; and cannot be said for others to hear."<sup>2</sup>

The form of the sonnet is exceptional for Rossetti: it

<sup>1</sup> The familiar, nay, famous Rossetti throat, prominent in so many of his pictures. In no. x he called it "enthroning," here columnar.

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Mr. Page for this quotation.

is one of the six in "The House of Life" which have no distinct pause at the end of the octave; the difference being here, of course, a concomitant of the content, namely, the list of her gifts, which continues through line 12.<sup>1</sup> Notable also is the arrangement of matter as in the Shakespearean sonnet, but without the Shakespearean rime-scheme: three quatrains with a concluding, summarizing couplet.

One can hardly guess "her name" (l. 14); it might be "Lilith" (see below on LXXVIII), but scarcely "Lizzie." Of course no mystification is intended, no deliberate concealment; rather, perhaps, a suggestion of the "ineffable name," something too sacred to be spoken.

## XXXII

*Equal Troth*

NOT by one measure mayst thou mete our love;

For how should I be loved as I love thee? —

I, graceless, joyless, lacking absolutely

All gifts that with thy queenship best behove; —

Thou, throned in every heart's elect alcove,

And crowned with garlands culled from every tree,

Which for no head but thine, by Love's decree,

All beauties and all mysteries interwove.

<sup>1</sup> The other sonnets in "The House of Life" with this running-over of octave into sestet are LXV, LXXII, LXXVI, XC, XCII; elsewhere in Rossetti, the following sonnets: For a Venetian Pastoral, For an Allegorical Dance of Women, Dantis Tenebrae, A Match with the Moon, Dawn on the Night Journey.



But here thine eyes and lips yield soft rebuke: —

“Then only” (say’st thou) “could I love thee less,  
When thou couldst doubt my love’s equality.”

Peace, sweet! If not to sum but worth we look, —

Thy heart’s transcendence, not my heart’s excess, —  
Then more a thousandfold thou lov’st than I.

Date: ?1871.

This sonnet is to be taken with the preceding, XXXI.

In the octave he compares his lack of love’s gifts with her who possesses all of love’s beauties and mysteries. But in the sestet she rebukes him, saying that she could love him less only if he should doubt her. To which he replies: If we consider not quantity of love, but worthiness, her love is a thousandfold greater than his.

### XXXIII

#### *Venus Victrix*

COULD Juno’s self more sovereign presence wear  
Than thou, ’mid other ladies throned in grace? —

Or Pallas, when thou bend’st with soul-stilled face  
O’er poet’s page gold-shadowed in thy hair?

Dost thou than Venus seem less heavenly fair

When o’er the sea of love’s tumultuous trance

Hovers thy smile, and mingles with thy glance  
That sweet voice like the last wave murmuring there?

Before such triune loveliness divine

Awestruck I ask, which goddess here most claims  
The prize that, howsoe’er adjudged, is thine?

Then Love breathes low the sweetest of thy names;  
And Venus Victrix to my heart doth bring  
Herself, the Helen of thy guerdoning.

Date: ?1871.

"The Beloved one is Juno, Pallas, and Venus, all in one; and is Helen to boot" (*R. D. W.*, p. 205).

She surpasses Juno in sovereign presence, Pallas when her golden hair shadows the page of poetry she is reading, Venus in loveliness when her smile hovers over the tumultuous sea of love and adds to her glance her sweet voice which is like the murmur of the last subsiding wave of a once tempestuous sea. Which goddess most claims the prize, though it is hers whatever the decision? Love answers with the sweetest of her names. And Venus, who had been victor in the Homeric story, brings him the Helen with whom she had rewarded Paris. (That is, his beloved becomes to him Helen, an earthly love, as well as the three divine.)

There are two snags here. By "the sweetest of thy names" W. M. R. understands Helen, but wonders if it is not Venus Victrix. If the lady of the sonnet is Rossetti's wife, the name would be Elizabeth, and sweetest to him might be Lizzie (as he usually addressed her), or her pet name Guggum. If this view seems flippant, one may explain the phrase as hyperbolic for "her very sweet name."<sup>1</sup> I fancy, however, that one must seek elsewhere for the name. The other difficulty is "the sea of Love's tumultuous trance." Trances are usually not tumultuous, but the word is used (quite properly) for rapture or ecstasy.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the last line of xxxi.

## XXXIV

*The Dark Glass*

NOT I myself know all my love for thee:

How should I reach so far, who cannot weigh

To-morrow's dower by gage of yesterday?

Shall birth and death, and all dark names that be

As doors and windows bared to some loud sea,

Lash deaf mine ears and blind my face with spray;

And shall my sense pierce love, — the last relay

And ultimate outpost of eternity?

Lo! what am I to Love, the lord of all?

One murmuring shell he gathers from the sand, —

One little heart-flame sheltered in his hand.

Yet through thine eyes he grants me clearest call

And veriest touch of powers primordial

That any hour-girt life may understand.

Date: 1871, Kelmscott (Scott, ii, 143, 145).

In this sonnet Rossetti comes close to genuine sublimity without his besetting sin of artificial elaboration either of idea or diction. Though apparently not one of his favorites, it is certainly one of his finest, and one of the true indexes of his mysticism.

I myself cannot know all my love for thee. How should I, who cannot even infer to-morrow from yesterday? If "birth" and "death" and all the obscure names we have as doors and windows opening on the loud sea of the unknown do but deafen my ears and blind my face with spray, how shall I with only my human senses understand love, the ultimate reach of eternity (the unknown)? To Love, the Supreme Lord, I am

only a murmuring shell on the sandy shore, a little heart-flame that he holds a moment in his hand. Yet through thine eyes He grants me the utmost power that humanity can enjoy of penetrating the unknowable.

It is noteworthy that even a simple paraphrase is scarcely necessary to render the sonnet wholly perspicuous; but attention may be drawn to the richness and complexity of the imagery. The dower of to-morrow is *weighed* by yesterday's *gage*. The doors and windows are *bared*. The mysteries of the infinite unknown beset us like a noisy sea, deafen us as with the sea's roar, and blind us as with the sea's spray, when we try to scan them from our little low *windows*. (Is there a reminiscence of Keats' "casements opening on the foam of perilous seas"?) Love is at the furthest bounds of the unknown; it is the last of a series of prearranged supplies or provisions for reaching the ultimate. In the first line *love* is the love of man and woman; in line 7 it is abstract love; in the sestet it is personified conventionally, and also as the supreme God. In lines 12-13 the senses of sight, hearing, and touch are completely blended.

## XXXV

*The Lamp's Shrine*

SOMETIMES I fain would find in thee some fault,  
That I might love thee still in spite of it:  
Yet how should our Lord Love curtail one whit  
Thy perfect praise whom most he would exalt?  
Alas! he can but make my heart's low vault  
Even in men's sight unworthier, being lit  
By thee, who thereby show'st more exquisite  
Like fiery chrysoprase in deep basalt.

Yet will I nowise shrink; but at Love's shrine  
 Myself within the beams his brow doth dart  
 Will set the flashing jewel of thy heart  
 In that dull chamber where it deigns to shine:  
 For lo! in honour of thine excellencies  
 My heart takes pride to show how poor it is.

Date: ?1871.

Her light illumines the poor low vault of his heart.

The first quatrain is clear enough. Then: His heart seems the unworthier, being lighted by her, and she in contrast seems more exquisite — like chrysoprase set in basalt.<sup>1</sup> But he will take pride in his unworthiness and will set before Love's shrine the flashing jewel of her heart in the dull chamber which is his own.

The language is suitable, but the idea does not rise above a rather commonplace quaintness — the most damning word in the Pre-Raphaelite vocabulary. The whole sonnet might be called a very favorable example of Rossetti's Early Italian or Dantesque manner.

### XXXVI (xvi, 1870)

#### *Life-in-Love*

NOT in thy body is thy life at all,  
 But in this lady's lips and hands and eyes;  
 Through these she yields thee life that vivifies  
 What else were sorrow's servant and death's thrall.

<sup>1</sup> "Fiery" is an unexpected epithet for chrysoprase, and basalt an unusual setting.

Look on thyself without her, and recall  
The waste remembrance and forlorn surmise  
That lived but in a dead-drawn breath of sighs  
O'er vanished hours and hours eventual.

Even so much life hath the poor tress of hair  
Which, stored apart, is all love hath to show  
For heart-beats and for fire-heats long ago;  
Even so much life endures unknown, even where,  
'Mid change the changeless night environeth,  
Lies all that golden hair undimmed in death.

Date: ?1868-70 (Tisdell).

This sonnet was marked in the printer's copy to be placed after XXV.

Here we meet for the first time *unmistakably* in the sequence the New Beloved. In the previous sonnets the Lady might be assumed to be Elizabeth Siddal Rossetti, though I doubt if the assumption is always warranted. Henceforward the other love must clearly be taken into consideration.

His life now is only in the New Beloved: but for her lips, hands, and eyes he would be "sorrow's servant and death's thrall." Before he knew her his life was a waste and his future seemed forlorn and hopeless. His past was as lifeless as the lock of that other's hair which he cherishes now, the only visible token of the past love; as lifeless as her unknown body in the grave where, amid the change<sup>1</sup> which changeless night (time) envelopes, lies undimmed all her golden hair.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Change here seems to include both physical decomposition and the changes and chances of this mortal life — which themselves include his affection for the New Beloved. (See xxxvii.)

<sup>2</sup> Rossetti was not present at the disinterring of the manuscript in his wife's coffin, but it was reported to him that the hair remained unchanged after the seven years' burial.

The repetitions in the second quatrain are perhaps troublesome. The full meaning is: remember the days that had been a barren waste and the future prospects then so forlorn, days empty and hopeless when life was but a living death full of sighs for the past and for the future.

With the first tercet, on the "poor tress of hair," should be compared the full story related by Sir Hall Caine:

I remember that one day,<sup>1</sup> opening a drawer of the book-case, under the books he took out a long, thick tress of rich auburn hair, and showed it to me for a moment. What he told me about it I cannot say, but indeed there was no need to tell me anything, for I thought I knew what it was and where it came from. That was one of those hushed moments of life in which silence is sacred, and I will not break it farther even now.<sup>2</sup>

The curious may recall Dante's *donna della finestra* in *The New Life*, Rossetti's translation, Collected Works, ii, 88, 90, and the note on p. 89.

### XXXVII (xvii, 1870)

#### *The Love-Moon*

"WHEN that dead face, bowered in the furthest years,  
Which once was all the life years held for thee,  
Can now scarce bid the tides of memory  
Cast on thy soul a little spray of tears, —

<sup>1</sup> [This was at the time of Rossetti's return to London (after the terrible days in Cumberland) in October, 1881 — the time of Rossetti's last illness. — P. F. B.]

<sup>2</sup> Hall Caine, *My Story*, New York, 1909, pp. 203 f.



How canst thou gaze into these eyes of hers  
Whom now thy heart delights in, and not see  
Within each orb Love's philtred euphrasy  
Make them of buried troth rembrancers?"

"Nay, pitiful Love, nay, loving Pity! Well  
Thou knowest that in these twain I have confess'd  
Two very voices of thy summoning bell.

Nay, Master, shall not Death make manifest  
In these the culminant changes which approve  
The love-moon that must light my soul to Love?"

Date: ?1868 (*R. D. W.*).

In the printer's copy this sonnet was marked to be placed after XXV.

This sonnet is to be taken with the preceding, wherein he declared that though he remembered the Old Love, he lives now only in and through the New Beloved. The God of Love charges him with inconstancy, and he replies that the second love is necessary to fulfill his worship of the god. (This self-vindication — if such it is; such at any rate *W. M. R.* takes it to be — must be admired rather for its ingenuity or even ingenuousness, than for its cogency. It is, at least, witness of an inner conflict.)

In the octave Love speaks: "When the memory of that dead face that once was all in all to thee can now scarcely bring tears into thine eyes, how canst thou gaze into the eyes of thy New Beloved and not see in them reminders of buried troth?" In the sestet he replies: "Nay, be merciful, Love! Thou well knowest that in these two women I have acknowledged thy mastery.

And in them shall not death reveal my soul borne aloft  
to that Love which is divine?"

The last lines are a little involved. Literally (so to say) they run: "Shall not Death reveal in these two women a change in me which is a development and a culmination like that of the moon, from the crescent to the full moon? And it is this very growth that shall win for my soul Love's salvation. When I die I shall be found to have progressed in Love up to the point of perfection."

"Love's philtred euphrasy" (l. 7) is less obscure when one remembers that the common eyebright (*Euphrasis officinalis*) was "formerly in repute as a remedy for diseases of the eyes." "Love [he says] will put into the eyes of the New Beloved a magic philtre which will make him see in them the eyes of his buried love." The literary reminiscence is *Paradise Lost*, xi, 414. Rossetti uses the term somewhat loosely, perhaps is not very clear about the actual meaning.

### XXXVIII (xviii, 1870)

#### *The Morrow's Message*

"THOU Ghost," I said, "and is thy name To-day? —  
Yesterday's son, with such an abject brow! —  
And can To-morrow be more pale than thou?"  
While yet I spoke, the silence answered: "Yea,  
Henceforth our issue is all grieved and grey,  
And each beforehand makes such poor avow  
As of old leaves beneath the budding bough  
Or night-drift that the sundawn shreds away."

Then cried I: "Mother of many malisons,  
O Earth, receive me to thy dusty bed!"  
But therewithal the tremulous silence said:  
"Lo! Love yet bids thy lady greet thee once: —  
Yea, twice, — whereby thy life is still the sun's;  
And thrice,— whereby the shadow of death is dead."

Date: ?1868-69 (Tisdell).

He cries out, wishing to die, when he learns that the future will be dark and barren, but is comforted on being told that he shall see his Lady again.

"Thou Ghost with such an abject brow," I said, "is thy name To-day? canst thou be the son of (my happy) Yesterday? Can To-morrow be paler than thou?" Silence answered: "Henceforth all thy days shall be gray; each day promises to be no better than the dead leaves in spring or the night mists at dawn." Then I cried: "May the accursed earth take me to herself." But Silence then said: "Love bids thy Lady greet thee once again, — yea, twice (whereby thy life is saved) — yea, thrice (whereby even the shadow of death is gone)."

Such is probably the meaning of the second tercet; yet it may possibly hint at more than one new love to come and solace him. At any rate, the sonnet as a whole expresses his dejection and despair of the future, a despair which is somewhat abated by Love. Coming immediately after XXXVII, it would seem to indicate that his answer to Love's reproach in that sonnet was not altogether satisfying. It also looks forward to the despondency of the following insomnia sonnet. In line 10 we find the first indication of his longing for death — a motif which is developed later.

## XXXIX (xix, 1870)

*Sleepless Dreams*

GIRT in dark growths, yet glimmering with one star,  
O night desirous as the nights of youth!

Why should my heart within thy spell, forsooth,  
Now beat, as the bride's finger-pulses are  
Quickened within the girdling golden bar?

What wings are these that fan my pillow smooth?  
And why does Sleep, waved back by Joy and Ruth,  
Tread softly round and gaze at me from far?

Nay, night deep-leaved! And would Love feign in thee  
Some shadowy palpitating grove that bears  
Rest for man's eyes and music for his ears?  
O lonely night! art thou not known to me,  
A thicket hung with masks of mockery  
And watered with the wasteful warmth of tears?

Date: ?1868-69 (Tisdell).

In the dark night of his sleeplessness there is one glimmering star; in the dark forest of his loneliness Love pretends there is a restful grove for him.

Notable here is the intricate imagery. The darkness of a "deep-leaved" forest is blended with the darkness of night and with a shadowy grove sacred to love. The night is full of amorous desire; his heart responds even as the bride's finger-pulses to her new marriage-ring. The moving air of the wood comes both from the wings of the Love-god and from the wings of Sleep — and then is comforting music.

Some of these same images appear in the short poem entitled "Insomnia," *Collected Works*, i, 328. In both poems the autobiographic significance needs no comment.

Alliteration is abundant throughout; for example, *g* and *r* in l. 1; *s* in the next three lines and in ll. 6, 7, 8, 10, and 11; *b* in l. 4; *g*, *d*, and *l* in l. 5; *f-p* in l. 6; *d* in l. 8; *n* in ll. 9 and 12; *m* in ll. 11 and 13; and the four *w*'s in l. 14 as a sort of climax. Moreover, the so-called "short *i*" is prominent in the first part: *in*, *glimmering*, *within*, *Finger*, *quickened*, *within*, *girdling*, *wings*, *pillow*; and also "long *i*" in *night*, *desirous*, *nights*, *bride*, *night*, *eyes*; then *e* in these, *Sleep*, *me*, *deep-leaved*, *thee*; and also *a* in *shadowy*, *palpitating*. All this besides the end rimes and the echoes in *girt-girdling* and *Love-grove*.

## XL

### *Severed Selves*

Two separate divided silences,  
 Which, brought together, would find loving voice;  
 Two glances which together would rejoice  
 In love, now lost like stars beyond dark trees;  
 Two hands apart whose touch alone gives ease;  
 Two bosoms which, heart-shrined with mutual flame,  
 Would, meeting in one clasp, be made the same;  
 Two souls, the shores wave-mocked of sundering seas:—  
 Such are we now. Ah! may our hope forecast  
 Indeed one hour again, when on this stream  
 Of darkened love once more the light shall gleam? —

An hour how slow to come, how quickly past, —  
Which blooms and fades, and only leaves at last,  
Faint as shed flowers, the attenuated dream.

Date: 1871 (Page).

This sonnet continues in the mood of XXXVIII. Of the new love he has enjoyed only "one hour," and since that the days have been dark. Although the love is mutual, circumstances, the nature of which is not even hinted at, have separated the two, and meanwhile he hopes, rather hopelessly, for a renewal of that one hour. On the biographical analogy, the situation is that of Rossetti in the early years of his desperate, tragically denied love for the Innominata. (See above, page 50.) Thus the poem, simple and moving as it stands, may receive an added poignancy of personal history.

## XLI

### *Through Death to Love*

LIKE labour-laden moonclouds faint to flee  
From winds that sweep the winter-bitten wold, —  
Like multiform circumfluence manifold  
Of night's flood-tide, — like terrors that agree  
Of hoarse-tongued fire and inarticulate sea, —  
Even such, within some glass dimmed by our breath,  
Our hearts discern wild images of Death,  
Shadows and shoals that edge eternity.

Howbeit athwart Death's imminent shade doth soar  
One Power, than flow of stream or flight of dove  
Sweeter to glide around, to brood above.

Tell me, my heart, — what angel-greeted door  
 Or threshold of wing-winnowed threshing-floor  
 Hath guest fire-fledged as thine, whose lord is Love?

Date: 1871, Kelmscott (Scott, ii, 143).

A peculiarly difficult and not very rewarding sonnet, in spite of some fine lines. W. M. R. confessed to be doubtful about it and accordingly has not clarified much, unless with regard to the Biblical allusions in the sestet. The chief puzzle was for him the "precise position that ought to be logically assigned to that clause 'within some glass dimmed by our breath.'" He places it thus in his paraphrase: "even such as these do our hearts discern wild images of Death, shadows and shoals which edge eternity. Our hearts discern them, as if reflected in a glass which our breath dims" (*R. D. W.*, p. 210). I submit the following summary for what it may be worth. "Our" (l. 7) seems to be the generalizing plural.

In a mirror dimmed by our breath, — that is, in our view of life confused by our own feelings and circumstances, — we (often) see wild images of Death. These images are shadows and shoals of eternity; they are also compared to thin wind-blown clouds<sup>1</sup> about the winter moon, to darkness surrounding the world like a flood-tide (which takes many forms, like those of the sea along the shore), and to a combined terror of raging fire and raging sea. Nevertheless, across these wild images of Death there soars a Power (that is, there shines a vision) which is sweeter (more soothing) than the dow of a stream or the flight of a dove.<sup>2</sup> Finally, in the second tercet

<sup>1</sup> "Moonclouds" is a characteristic compound. "Labour-laden" is, of course, a reminiscence of *L'Allegro*, l. 74.

<sup>2</sup> Literally: "sweeter in gliding around than flow of stream, sweeter in brooding above than flight of dove" (*R. D. W.*, p. 210). This is perspicuous enough; and if not very sensible, Rossetti must bear the blame.



he addresses his heart (cf. "Our hearts," l. 7), saying: What door visited by an angel, what threshing-floor fanned by angelic wings, ever had such a fire-winged guest as thine, whose lord is Love? <sup>1</sup>

In sum: Often the terrors of Death knock at the door of our hearts; but Love is greater than Death, and at the door of my heart now stands a fiery-winged angel of love. Or, in terms of the title: he has passed through thoughts and fears of death to the acceptance of love.

W. M. R. (*L. and M.*, i, 271 ff.) would throw some doubt on Rossetti's contemplation of suicide in 1868-69. But there are many degrees of suicidal intention, and it is improbable that a man so given to moods of despondency as Rossetti should not have given some thought to Death as the great panacea. This sonnet, composed in 1871, appears to be an implicit record of such thoughts. See also LXXXVII. W. B. Scott, with whom Rossetti visited during these months of depression, is quite explicit on the point: "About Gabriel — the short ending to his ills, in the worst case, was of course often spoken of by him" (*Rossetti Papers*, p. 373). Cf. also Scott's account of the incident at the "Devil's Punch-Bowl," *Autobiographical Notes*, ii, 112.

<sup>1</sup> "No doubt the allusions here are to some passages or incidents in the Bible. Of angel-greeted doors several are recorded, and it may be difficult to say which is more particularly meant. The 'wing-winnowed threshing floor' must be that of Ornan (I *Chronicles* xxi. 21). The angel, who was stayed from destroying Jerusalem after David had numbered the people, 'stood by the threshing-floor of Ornan the Jebusite'" (*R. D. W.*, p. 210). If Ornan's angel is intended here, the background of pestilence and punishment would fit the wild images of Death in the sonnet; and other slight parallels might be threaded together — with slight result.

## XLII

*Hope Overtaken*

I DEEMED thy garments, O my Hope, were grey,  
So far I viewed thee. Now the space between  
Is passed at length; and garmented in green  
Even as in days of yore thou stand'st to-day.  
Ah God! and but for lingering dull dismay,  
On all that road our footsteps erst had been  
Even thus commingled, and our shadows seen  
Blent on the hedgerows and the water-way.

O Hope of mine whose eyes are living love,  
No eyes but hers, — O Love and Hope the same! —  
Lean close to me, for now the sinking sun  
That warmed our feet scarce gilds our hair above.  
O hers thy voice and very hers thy name!  
Alas, cling round me, for the day is done!

Date: ?1871.

The Lover, now united to his Lady, refers here to the untoward delay which took place before the union was effected. He speaks of his "Hope," which may at starting be understood as meaning the hope that he entertained for union with the Lady; but this idea merges in the idea of the object hoped for, the Lady herself, and the imagery used develops accordingly (*R. D. W.*, p. 210).

Hope once seemed clad in grey — comparative hopelessness. Now that time has passed and Hope wears her customary green — true hopefulness. But for a lingering inescapable dismay it might always have been so — Hope and he walking together always. Now Hope and Love are one.

This seems to be, freely rendered, an expression of Rossetti's hesitation and postponement of his marriage, with the reconciliation of old and new hope which accompanied his decision. The Love is then that for his wife, and the Hope that of a happy marriage. Yet, on the other hand, since this sonnet is apparently to be taken closely with the two that follow, the Lady whose name is Hope may be the New Beloved. The ambiguity is not decisive against either interpretation; for it would be characteristic of Rossetti to let the sonnet stand for two different meanings, one literal or original, the other deriving from its position in the sequence. It is to be noted that XLIII and XLIV belong to the year 1871; XLII belongs possibly to the same year, but need not have been written at the same time or as a companion-piece. If they were at first distinct, the similarity of title and the obvious "adaptability" of XLII might have been prompted its grouping with XLIII and XLIV. It will be noticed that the *a* rime of XLII is the same as the *b* rime of XLIII.

## XLIII

*Love and Hope*

BLESS love and hope. Full many a withered year  
Whirled past us, eddying to its chill doomsday;  
And clasped together where the blown leaves lay,  
We long have knelt and wept full many a tear.  
Yet lo! one hour at last, the Spring's compeer,  
Flutes softly to us from some green byeway:  
Those years, those tears are dead, but only they: —  
Bless love and hope, true soul; for we are here.

Cling heart to heart; nor of this hour demand  
Whether in very truth, when we are dead,  
Our hearts shall wake to know Love's golden head  
Sole sunshine of the imperishable land;  
Or but discern, through night's unfeatured scope,  
Scorn-fired at length the illusive eyes of Hope.

Date: ?1871 (*R. D. W.*).

Apparently a sequel to the preceding sonnet — see the note just above — and leads on to no. XLIV.

Bless love and hope. The “one hour” of love (cf. XL) has arrived, and is equal to an hour of spring though the season is autumn. Let us seize this hour, beloved, not asking whether it means lasting happiness or transitory; whether when we awake after death, we shall find ourselves in the imperishable land lighted by the sun of love, or in a black featureless night where gleam only the eyes of Hope darting scorn upon us because we were illuded.

Like XLII this sonnet may be read two ways. “We” may be Rossetti and his wife, and the sestet refer to the future life; or “we” may be Rossetti and the Innominata, and the sestet refer primarily to the future life, but secondarily to the death and illusive hope which their separation following “this hour” would mean to them. I incline to the former interpretation as being simpler, though simplicity is not always a safe guide with Rossetti.

## XLIV

*Cloud and Wind*

LOVE, should I fear death most for you or me?

Yet if you die, can I not follow you,

Forcing the straits of change? Alas! but who

Shall wrest a bond from night's inveteracy,

Ere yet my hazardous soul put forth, to be

Her warrant against all her haste might rue? —

Ah! in your eyes so reached what dumb adieu,

What unsunned gyres of waste eternity?

And if I die the first, shall death be then

A lampless watchtower whence I see you weep? —

Or (woe is me!) a bed wherein my sleep

Ne'er notes (as death's dear cup at last you drain)

The hour when you too learn that all is vain

And that Hope sows what Love shall never reap?

Date: ?1871 (*R. D. W.*).

Whichever of us shall die first, what of the hereafter?

If you should die first, can I not follow you, forcing my way violently across the straits (of change) between life and death? But who shall wrest from inveterate night a bond or guarantee, so that I might know before my soul sets forth on the hazardous way whether I should later repent my haste. If I should come to you thus, unwarranted, what mute sorrow would appear in your eyes, recognizing that we were thus parted utterly forever; what sunless gyres of waste eternity would separate us? . . . And if I should die first, shall I look down from death as from a lampless watchtower and see you weeping? Or, alas, will death be an oblivious sleep, so that I shall never know when you die or when you learn that all is vanity?

The prime difficulty here is the title. William Sharp remarks lightly that it is "not easy to understand." The implication is perhaps that these thoughts of death and separation are, though serious and pathetic and full of terror, as empty, as shifting, as uncapturable, unstable as cloud and wind. It is all "thin air," the question and perhaps the answer.

In lines 7-10 the reminiscence of "The Blessed Damozel" seems unmistakable.

From the date of the sonnet one must infer that the beloved was not Mrs. Rossetti; from its position in the sequence one might infer her to be the Innominata. It is, of course, possible that Rossetti is writing retrospectively of a past "moment," and remembering his wife's ill health. On the other hand the general idea — one of us shall die before the other — is a commonplace among poets — and less gifted lovers as well. The vague hint of suicide, in the octave, is not to be overlooked. But there is really no need to identify the beloved.

## XLV

### *Secret Parting*

BECAUSE our talk was of the cloud-control  
And moon-track of the journeying face of Fate,  
Her tremulous kisses faltered at love's gate  
And her eyes dreamed against a distant goal:  
But soon, remembering her how brief the whole  
Of joy, which its own hours annihilate,  
Her set gaze gathered, thirstier than of late,  
And as she kissed, her mouth became her soul.

Thence in what ways we wandered, and how strove  
To build with fire-tried vows the piteous home  
Which memory haunts and whither sleep may roam,—  
They only know for whom the roof of Love  
Is the still-seated secret of the grove,  
Nor spire may rise nor bell be heard therefrom.

Date: ?1868-69 (Tisdell).

W. M. R.'s paraphrase of this and the following sonnets is all that is needed. If all his versions had been as satisfactory as these, a good deal of trouble might have been saved.

The reader should observe in this title the epithet "secret." The Lovers have met in secret, and have parted in secret, with an uncertain outlook as to their meeting anew. All the imagery of the sonnet is framed to correspond.

Because the talk between my Lady and me had been concerning the journeying face of Fate — that face which is like a moon pursuing her interrupted track athwart the controlling clouds — my Lady's tremulous kisses faltered at love's gate (as they were to meet my lips), and her eyes seemed to dream towards a distant goal. But soon, remembering how brief is the whole of joy, which is quenched by those same short hours during which it lasts, her set gaze gathered, more craving than of late, and, as she kissed, her mouth testified the innermost emotions of her soul. In what paths we wandered from that point, and how we strove to build, with vows tried as by fire, that piteous home (of mutual companionship and faith) which memory haunts thenceforth, and whither sleep may waft us in dream — this can be known to them only for whom the roof of Love (the trysting-place where Love permits his votaries to meet and awhile abide) is the clandestine secret of the grove whence neither spire rises to catch the eye, nor bell sounds to sense of hearing (*R. D. W.*, pp. 212-213).

"Her mouth became her soul," l. 8, is only an intensified version of V, ll. 7-8. W. M. R. seems to miss the



implication of l. 14: marriage solemnized in a church (with perhaps a contrast to the pagan "grove" of l. 13).

## XLVI (xxi, 1870)

*Parted Love*

WHAT shall be said of this embattled day  
And armèd occupation of this night  
By all thy foes beleaguered, — now when sight  
Nor sound denotes the loved one far away?  
Of these thy vanquished hours what shalt thou say, —  
As every sense to which she dealt delight  
Now labours lonely o'er the stark noon-height  
To reach the sunset's desolate disarray?  
Stand still, fond fettered wretch! while Memory's art  
Parades the Past before thy face, and lures  
Thy spirit to her passionate portraitures:  
Till the tempestuous tide-gates flung apart  
Flood with wild will the hollows of thy heart,  
' And thy heart rends thee, and thy body endures.

Date: 1869.

This sonnet may be construed as a sequel to the preceding one. The Lover and his Lady parted in secret, and have not met again, and he divines no prospect of re-meeting.

This day stands, as it were, in battle-array against me, and this forthcoming night will be like an armed occupation of the stronghold of my being, beleaguered by all my [thy] foes. Of this day and night what shall be said, now when neither sight nor sound denotes the loved one, so far away? Of these my vanished hours what shall I say — while every sense of mine to which she once dealt delight now labours lonely over the

stark height of noonday, only to reach the desolate disarray of sunset? Stand still, fond fettered wretch! while the art of Memory parades the rapturous past before thy face, and lures thy spirit onward to those passionate images which she evokes; till the tempestuous tide-gates of desire and emotion, flung apart, flood with wild volition<sup>1</sup> the hollows of thy heart, and thy heart rends thee, and thy body helplessly endures" (*R. D. W.*, pp. 213-214).

In a letter to his brother, written from Penkill, 14 September 1869 Rossetti wrote:

In the new sonnet, *Parted Love*, the last line is declared by Scott to be too violent. Do you think so? It occurs to me to say, "And thy feet stir not, and thy body endures." Do you like this better? It conveys the sense of impotent retention, which is wanted, but that is already conveyed in line seven (*L. and M.*, ii, 216).

## XLVII (xxii, 1870)

### *Broken Music*

THE mother will not turn, who thinks she hears  
 Her nursling's speech first grow articulate;  
 But breathless with averted eyes elate  
 She sits, with open lips and open ears,  
 That it may call her twice. 'Mid doubts and fears  
 Thus oft my soul has hearkened; till the song,  
 A central moan for days, at length found tongue,  
 And the sweet music welled and the sweet tears.

But now, whatever while the soul is fain  
 To list that wonted murmur, as it were  
 The speech-bound sea-shell's low importunate strain, —

<sup>1</sup> [The text has "will." Is not the meaning rather "will," "desire" than "volition"? — P. F. B.]

No breath of song, thy voice alone is there,  
 O bitterly beloved! and all her gain  
 Is but the pang of unpermitted prayer.

Date: ?1869 (*R. D. W.*).

"The first section of this sonnet indicates — and no doubt with accurate truth — the mood of emotional contemplation which, for our author, preceded the actual work of poetic composition" (*R. D. W.*, p. 214).

The octave is exquisite in expression and transparent in meaning. The sestet continues: But now, whenever my soul would hear that song, which is like the low murmur of a sea-shell striving to be articulate,<sup>1</sup> it hears only thy voice, O bitterly beloved! And my soul's only gain is the pang of unpermitted prayer.<sup>2</sup>

With this sonnet we reach a conclusion after the splendid climax of XLV and XLVI, to the section or group beginning with XXXVI, which treats of his secret or illicit love. All of these were written between the years 1868 and 1871 (some of them we can date precisely, the others by inference<sup>3</sup>) when Rossetti was suffering from physical and mental ill-health. Since 1867

<sup>1</sup> The "seashell metaphor is from Landor, who accused Wordsworth of stealing it from Landor," said Buchanan (p. 61).

<sup>2</sup> W. M. R. understands this as "prayer for a boon not to be granted." It means rather, I think, a prayer that ought not to be prayed; more plainly, a prayer for the unpermitted secret love.

<sup>3</sup> Seven of the twelve (xxxvi, xxxvii, xxxviii, xxxix, xlv, xlvi, xlvii) appeared in the Poems of 1870: six of them (xxxvii, xxxvi 1, xxxix, xlv, xlvi, xlvii) were included in the printed but unpublished volume of 1869; the seventh (xxxvi) was added after the exhumation of the buried manuscript, but there is no reason to suppose that all of the fourteen sonnets added to the 1869 collection for publication in 1870 were composed before the burial of the manuscript in 1862, and, in fact, we know that two of them (xl and ci) were written about 1869. See Appendix 1.

he had been afflicted with insomnia (cf. XXXIX). The next year his eyes began to trouble. He had latterly also been afflicted with that "surgical matter" ("far from being a trifle") which Brother William makes as mysterious and as fascinating as My Uncle Toby's wound. With all this, and his usual "high-strung nerves and restless imagination," there was also what the philadelphic guardian cautiously calls "a more or less uneasy conscience." Rossetti was extremely despondent. Incapacitated for a time for painting, he had apparently taken Scott's advice — "Live for your poetry." Sonnets and other poems were written in some quantity and the poetic spirit grew with what it fed on. In October, 1869, the manuscript was disinterred. In the spring of 1870 the Poems were published; and this event was followed by some excitement over his reported "packing" of the reviews. In Scotland in 1868 Rossetti had begun an over-indulgence in whiskey; in 1870 he began taking chloral in dangerous quantities. Altogether these were years of nervous tension and actual physical illness. But "at the bottom of it all" was the "more or less uneasy conscience"; and at the bottom of this uneasy conscience — though the yielding to friends' advice and to his own desire for poetic recognition which led to the violation of Mrs. Rossetti's grave had its contributory share — was his remorse-bitten memory of the tragic love affair which had made the love and marriage and death of Elizabeth Siddal more tragic still.

## XLVIII (xxiii, 1870)

*Death-in-Love*

THERE came an image in Life's retinue  
That had Love's wings and bore his gonfalon:  
Fair was the web, and nobly wrought thereon,  
O soul-sequestered face, thy form and hue!  
Bewildering sounds, such as Spring wakens to,  
Shook in its folds; and through my heart its power  
Sped trackless as the immemorable hour  
When birth's dark portal groaned and all was new.

But a veiled woman followed, and she caught  
The banner round its staff, to furl and cling, —  
Then plucked a feather from the bearer's wing,  
And held it to his lips that stirred it not,  
And said to me, "Behold, there is no breath:  
I and this Love are one, and I am Death."

Date: One of the MSS is dated "Dies atra 1st May 1869." Mr. Page notes that on 2 May 1861 Rossetti announced to his mother that his wife had just been delivered of a dead child.

W. M. R. explains:

In this sonnet the imagery is distinct, and the apologue is narrated unambiguously. The thing signified, however, may be less tangible, and open to some difference of interpretation. The title, "Death-in-Love," must serve as our guide. It intimates that Earthly Love partakes of the nature of Death. Death dominates and concludes Earthly Love; Love is the thrall of mortality (*R. D. W.*, p. 215).

In Life's retinue came a figure that had Love's wings and bore Love's banner. This banner was of fair texture and on it was embroidered her picture.<sup>1</sup> In its folds bewildering sounds were audible, like the sounds that arouse spring. Its power (influence) sped through my heart leaving no more trace than the unrememberable hour of birth. This figure was followed by a veiled woman, Death, who furled the banner, and plucking a feather from his (Love's) wing held it to his lips, saying: "Behold, there is no breath: he is not alive. We two are one, and I am Death."

This has been conjectured to be a premonition of Elizabeth Siddal's death; and so it might be if the conjectured date, 1854-55, were reliable.<sup>2</sup> The "Dantesque-rie" of the sonnet favors the assumption of an early date, but it is scarcely logical to base a conjecture of date on a conjectural interpretation. It will be sufficient, perhaps, to let the sonnet stand for a general truth without personal application. And the date on the manuscript can hardly be gainsaid.

XLIX, L, LI, LII (xxiv-xxvii, 1870)

*Willowwood*

Date: December 1868 (*L. and M.*, i, 250; *Rossetti Papers*, p. 339).

The four sonnets named "Willow-wood" represent, in a general sense, the pangs of severance; they need hardly be called obscure, but have what may be termed remoteness of treatment. All is given under forms at once concrete and

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<sup>1</sup> The text has "soul-sequestered face," — a characteristic Rossetian difficulty. W. M. R. expands the phrase, no doubt rightly, with the following words: "face sequestered and isolated from all other faces by depth of soul, speaking through the features"; and I suppose this means the face of his Lady.

<sup>2</sup> Tisdal, p. 264.

subtle. By "severance" we might understand "severance by death," for both the word and the idea extend to that; but severance by untoward conditions on earth appears to be more particularly contemplated in the sonnets (*R. D. W.*, p. 216).

Thus W. M. R.'s feeling is (apparently) that the *In-nominata* is meant, not Elizabeth Siddal Rossetti. The poet's own statement (see below) is ambiguous, since "divided" may be taken either way. But this is not a matter on which W. M. R. would err; and in the second sonnet the words "For once, for once alone," together with "implacable . . . kiss," pretty strongly support his view. Lafcadio Hearn held what may be said to be the usual view; and I transcribe his rendering of the first sonnet, partly as a curiosity, partly for its simplicity: to correct its misunderstanding will be easy enough.

Cf. Buxton Forman's praise:

A realism as nobly terrible as that stamped all over the pages of the grim and splendid *Commedia* appears in many of the songs and sonnets under discussion. I would note especially the manner in which things past are presented in all the mystic terror of their relentless continued existence, as in the four sonnets headed *Willow-wood*, wherein the speaker tells how, through the cadenced dropping of his tears, and through the half-recognized song sung by Love, he became

‘aware of a dumb throng  
That stood aloof, one form by every tree,  
All mournful forms, for each was I or she,  
The shades of those our days that had no tongue.’

Nothing can be more vivid and clear-cut than the apparition of these tongueless days walking in 'Willow-wood' 'with hollow faces burning white'; nor can those sonnets be at all surpassed for mellow beauty of sound that takes a colour in the mind and abides there as a perfect thing (*Our Living Poets*, p. 211).



## I

I SAT with Love upon a woodside well,  
Leaning across the water, I and he;  
Nor ever did he speak nor looked at me,  
But touched his lute wherein was audible  
The certain secret thing he had to tell:  
Only our mirrored eyes met silently  
In the low wave; and that sound came to be  
The passionate voice I knew; and my tears fell.  
And at their fall, his eyes beneath grew hers;  
And with his foot and with his wing-feathers  
He swept the spring that watered my heart's drouth.  
Then the dark ripples spread to waving hair,  
And as I stooped, her own lips rising there  
Bubbled with brimming kisses at my mouth.

The sonnet describes a dream or trance of divided love momentarily re-united by the longing fancy; and in the imagery of the dream, the face of the beloved rises through deep waters to kiss the lover ("The Stealthy School," as cited, pp. 483-484).

"The certain secret thing" (l. 5) may be a hint of the poet's secret love or may refer to the song of Love in the third sonnet.

This is a dream of the dead woman loved. The lover finds himself seated with the god of love . . . at the edge of a spring near the forest. He does not look at the god of love, neither does the god of love look at him; they were friends long ago, but now — what is the use? She is dead. By the reflection in the water only he knows that Love is looking down, and he does not wish to speak to him. But Love will not leave him alone. He hears the tone of a musical instrument, and that

music makes him suddenly very sad, for it seems like the voice of the dead for whom he mourns. It makes his tears fall into the water; and immediately, magically, the reflection of the eyes of Love in the water become like the eyes of the woman he loved. Then while he looks in wonder, the little god stirs the surface of the water with wings and feet, and the ripples become like the hair of the dead woman, and as the lover bends down, her lips rise up through the water to kiss him.<sup>1</sup>

## 2

AND now Love sang: but his was such a song,  
So meshed with half-remembrance hard to free,  
As souls disused in death's sterility  
May sing when the new birthday tarries long.  
And I was made aware of a dumb throng  
That stood aloof, one form by every tree,  
All mournful forms, for each was I or she,  
The shades of those our days that had no tongue.  
They looked on us, and knew us and were known;  
While fast together, alive from the abyss,  
Clung the soul-wrung implacable close kiss;  
And pity of self through all made broken moan  
Which said, "For once, for once, for once alone!"  
And still Love sang, and what he sang was this: —

Love sang such a song as souls would sing who had waited long in the blank sterility of death for rebirth or reincarnation,<sup>2</sup> a song difficult to remember. Then I perceived a throng

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<sup>1</sup> Lafcadio Hearn, *Pre-Raphaelite and Other Poets*, New York, 1922, p. 101. This passage and those on XV and XCI are reprinted with the kind permission of the publishers, Messrs. Dodd, Mead and Company.

<sup>2</sup> This is perhaps as mysterious as what song the sirens sang. Is it an impatient song, or one that is imperfect because the singer is out of

of silent figures, the shades of our days of thwarted love. We (he and the beloved) recognized them and they us. Meanwhile the kiss (at the close of the preceding sonnet) continues close and implacable (insatiate); and in self-pity the two moan: For this once only do we yield.<sup>1</sup>

## 3

“O YE, all ye that walk in Willowwood,  
 That walk with hollow faces burning white;  
 What fathom-depth of soul-struck widowhood,  
 What long, what longer hours, one lifelong night,  
 Ere ye again, who so in vain have wooed  
 Your last hope lost, who so in vain invite  
 Your lips to that their unforgotten food,  
 Ere ye, ere ye again shall see the light!

Alas! the bitter banks in Willowwood,  
 With tear-spurge wan, with blood-wort burning  
 red:

practice? As to reincarnation, W. M. R. interprets slightly otherwise: “The basis of the phrase or image evidently is the idea (familiar in religious speculation or meditation) that the human soul remains, after the death of the body, in a state of suspended animation, awaiting ‘the restitution of all things’ at the Day of Judgment. The words of the text are — ‘As souls disused in death’s sterility May sing,’ &c. This may possibly mean — ‘As disused souls may sing in death’s sterility’; but I think the construction shown in my paraphrase is the more likely” (*R. D. W.*, p. 217 n.). The paraphrase runs: “souls, disused (from the functions of life) in the sterility of death.” I agree on the last point; on the other more is to be said. William Michael at one time dabbled a good deal in the occult; his brother was less interested, but sometimes curious. Both must have come upon the idea that between successive incarnations, on this planet or others, souls must wait through a “sterile” interval of greater or less duration. In this period they are “disused”; the interval itself is called, from the human point of view, death.

<sup>1</sup> Or perhaps: Only once did we yield, *i. e.*, the “one hour” of XL.

Alas! if ever such a pillow could

Steep deep the soul in sleep till she were dead, —  
Better all life forget her than this thing,  
That Willowwood should hold her wandering!”

Love's song: All ye who suffer from unsatisfied love, how long is the night ere ye shall again behold the day! Alas that your souls may not die, rather than wander in Willowwood.

This sonnet is bizarre to the last degree. First, some textual notes may not be altogether supererogatory. Willowwood is a grave, with a well or fountain, sacred to those who have loved and lost and cannot forget. “Fathom-depth” (l. 3), unless meaningless, suggests a great depth because measured in fathoms, not in feet; perhaps — deep as the sea. “Soul-struck widowhood” (l. 3) means separation that has struck to the very soul. “Unforgotten food” (l. 7) is, of course, kisses. “Tear-spurge” and “blood-wort” (l. 10) are explained by W. M. R.: “‘Spurge’ and ‘wort’ are of course two familiar plant names; the poet, for the purpose of his vision of passionate misery, associates these plant names with ‘tears’ and ‘blood,’ and invents ( I suppose it is a mere invention) ‘tear-spurge’ and ‘blood-wort’” (*R. D. W.*, p. 218 n.).

Second: the rime-scheme is irregular and very unusual in carrying over octave rimes into the sestet: *abab abab acacdd*. The quasi-dactylic rimes — *Willowwood, widowhood, pillow could* — are the more peculiar because they give an effect of shortening the lines in which they occur from five beats to four. Spondees and spondaic approximations abound.

Third: most interesting of all are the sound effects.

Besides the rimes and alliteration there are curious echoes in *long, longer, lifelong*; again, *in vain, in vain, invite; last, lost; steep, deep, sleep*. And finally there are the frequent repetitions through lines 4 to 8, imitating the long-drawn resolution of a complex chord feeling slowly toward the dominant, a sort of protracted cadence or seven-fold amen. In fact, the whole sonnet, being Love's "song," is a curious experiment in musical imitation: whether successful or not, will be variously judged. For my own part, I find it all but satisfying (being done only once) — except *pillow could*, which is bathos fathom-deep.

## 4

So sang he: and as meeting rose and rose  
    Together cling through the wind's wellaway  
    Nor change at once, yet near the end of day  
The leaves drop loosened where the heart-stain glows,—  
So when the song died did the kiss uncloze;  
    And her face fell back drowned, and was as grey  
    As its grey eyes; and if it ever may  
Meet mine again I know not if Love knows.

Only I know that I leaned low and drank  
A long draught from the water where she sank,  
    Her breath and all her tears and all her soul:  
And as I leaned, I know I felt Love's face  
Pressed on my neck with moan of pity and grace,  
    Till both our heads were in his aureole.

As two roses, blown against each other, cling throughout the storm's moaning wind and only at the end of day are the petals freed about the flower's red core; so at the ceasing of

Love's song did our lips part and her face vanished in the water as gray as her eyes. And if that kiss shall ever be repeated I know not if Love himself knows. And then (he says) he drank a long draught of that passionate memory, and was comforted by the sympathy of Love.

Here (in ll. 8 and 12) as frequently, Love is not merely the personalized abstraction roughly equivalent to Eros or Amor, but the divine being or divine spirit.

This vision in Willowwood, with its grief and ecstasy, has given him something like the catharsis of tragedy.<sup>1</sup>

### LIII

#### *Without Her*

WHAT of her glass without her? The blank grey  
There where the pool is blind of the moon's face.  
Her dress without her? The tossed empty space  
Of cloud-rack whence the moon has passed away.  
Her paths without her? Day's appointed sway  
Usurped by desolate night. Her pillowed place  
Without her? Tears, ah me! for love's good grace,  
And cold forgetfulness of night or day.

What of the heart without her? Nay, poor heart,  
Of thee what word remains ere speech be still?  
A wayfarer by barren ways and chill,  
Steep ways and weary, without her thou art,  
Where the long cloud, the long wood's counterpart,  
Sheds doubled darkness up the labouring hill.

<sup>1</sup> Buchanan, on the other hand, saw only "the supreme silliness and worthlessness of 'Willow-wood'" (p. 61).

Date: ?1871.

"I cannot tell you," said Rossetti to Hall Caine, "at what terrible moment it [this sonnet] was wrung from me."<sup>1</sup>

This cry of infinite personal pathos is sacred and is too perfect to need paraphrase. Yet, in the face of confessed profanation, one comment must be permitted because it illustrates what is, I think, one of the weaknesses or dangers of "The House of Life" and of all autobiographic poetry. When the poet unlocks his heart, he himself commits the first violation.

No one reads this sonnet without feeling that the memory of Rossetti's wife was its inspiration. It stands, however, in the midst of sonnets which refer to the in-nominate other beloved. One should recall here the testimony of Mr. A. C. Benson, who had carefully studied the manuscripts, that they "bear witness to the perpetual alterations and rearrangements which took place before the eventual publication, and reveal how hard a task it was for Rossetti to satisfy himself."<sup>2</sup> With his insistence upon "fundamental brainwork" Rossetti did not place this sonnet here without consciousness of its effect. We must therefore recognize that he wishes us to associate Willowwood with the same person — if we read autobiography into the sequence at all. Or perhaps it would be better to say that he does not wish us to keep the two loves separate, and therefore he himself interweaves them — not with the view of concealment (which would be absurd after the plain statements of XXXVI and XXXVII) but for the sake of artistic blending. It is noteworthy that the succeeding sonnets

<sup>1</sup> *Recollections*, p. 221. See also note on LXXXVI.

<sup>2</sup> *Rossetti*, p. 130.



are ambiguous in that they, even as the Willowwood sonnets, may be taken to refer to either love.

William Sharp calls this sonnet the "key-note of the whole, the loss that succeeds youth and is the heart of change." This can hardly be, since the key-note would be an expression of the tragedy which caused his remorse.

## LIV

*Love's Fatality*

SWEET Love, — but oh! most dread Desire of Love  
Life-thwarted. Linked in gyves I saw them stand,  
Love shackled with Vain-longing, hand to hand:  
And one was eyed as the blue vault above:  
But hope tempestuous like a fire-cloud hove  
I' the other's gaze, even as in his whose wand  
Vainly all night with spell-wrought power has spann'd  
The unyielding caves of some deep treasure-trove.  
Also his lips, two writhen flakes of flame,  
Made moan: "Alas O Love, thus leashed with me!  
Wing-footed thou, wing-shouldered, once born free:  
And I, thy cowering self, in chains grown tame, —  
Bound to thy body and soul, named with thy name, —  
Life's iron heart, even Love's Fatality."

Date: ?1871.

W. M. R. explains thus: "Love is in himself free and happy. But Loving Desire, enchained by the necessities and prohibitions of Life, is a dismal captive, and brings Love himself into the same fetters and the same misery" (*R. D. W.*, p. 219).

It is possible to interpret the lines somewhat differently, if by "Loving Desire" is meant only fleshly passion taken abstractly. For in line 3 "Vain-longing" seems to be identical with "Desire of Love" in line 1. The two contrasted figures would therefore be the pure sweet love that is his and the hoped-for unsatisfied love that cannot be his (desire that cannot be gratified). Thus the last lines become an outcry at once savage and pathetic: the pure god-like free-born love is bound (through marriage?) to the other, that now cowers meekly. And this suggests, without forcing (though I admit the danger), the biographical parallel.

Possibly W. M. R.'s interpretation implies this; and mine is in truth rather an extension of his than an alteration of it.

The last line seems to mean: from this unhappy union it is plain that Life's heart is stern and hard as well as sometimes warm and soft; <sup>1</sup> this unhappy union is verily Love's great fatality.

In a word, it is a part of the cruelty of life that love should be both pure and passionate. And this meaning alone is sufficient, without adding the biographic parable.

<sup>1</sup> W. M. R. paraphrases: "chains which are the iron heart of Life"; and adds in a footnote (p. 220): "According to the structure of the sentence, it might seem that 'I' (*i. e.*, Desire of Love, or Vain-Longing) am 'Life's iron heart, even Love's fatality.' But to me this seems hardly consistent with the general drift of the sonnet, especially the opening phrase, 'Desire of Love *life-thwarted*.' I understand rather that 'Life's iron heart' is a synonym of the 'chains' wherein Desire of Love has grown tame." This again is somewhat different from my reading, at least less "tiresomely precise."

## LV (xxviii, 1870)

*Stillborn Love*

THE hour which might have been yet might not be,  
 Which man's and woman's heart conceived and bore  
 Yet whereof life was barren, — on what shore  
 Bides it the breaking of Time's weary sea?  
 Bondchild of all consummate joys set free,  
 It somewhere sighs and serves, and mute before  
 The house of Love, hears through the echoing door  
 His hours elect in choral consonancy.

But lo! what wedded souls now hand in hand  
 Together tread at last the immortal strand  
 With eyes where burning memory lights love home?  
 Lo! how the little outcast hour has turned  
 And leaped to them and in their faces yearned: —  
 "I am your child: O parents, ye have come!"

Date: ?1869 (*R. D. W.*); ?1868-70 (Tisdell).

"The despair of this new unsatisfied love" (Tisdell, p. 274).

This is a companion-piece to the preceding sonnet.

A man and a woman love, but the moment when their love might find actual fruition occurs not in this world nor in time — only in the realm of eternity. That moment is, as it were, a child which, totally secluded from them in time, hails them in eternity as its parents (*R. D. W.*, pp. 220-221).

In other words, Life's iron heart no more will afflict them with its chains when they have escaped beyond the shore of time; the love that was thwarted in this

world is consummated in Love's heaven. The Hour of love conceived in the hearts of the two lovers was still-born in this life, but "somewhere" in a life beyond this waits outside the eternal "House of Love," through the door of which it hears the elect Hours singing within. But lo! the two lovers' souls meet at last on the immortal strand, and the Hour of their love welcomes them.

The word "hour" is reminiscent of XL, l. 10 and XLIII, ll. 6 and 9. Line 5 seems to mean that the Hour of love is kept in bondage by the joys which have found consummation and freedom in this earthly life; that is, the pleasures he has enjoyed have repressed and made impossible this love. "Serves" (l. 6) is used in the mediaeval technical sense of service to the god of love.

It is worth noting that this sonnet, though clearly referring to the Other Beloved, might also seem to refer to Rossetti's wife, the hour standing then for their uncompleted love cut short by her death.

Along with LXV this sonnet was regarded at one time by Rossetti as "heading the series in value."<sup>1</sup>

## LVI, LVII, LVIII

### *True Woman*

Date: Before 15 September, 1881 (*L. and M.*, i, 369, ii, 386); 1881 (*R. D. W.*, p. 171).

The ideal woman has bodily beauty and sweetness, she is wine and music, and yet a sacred mystery. She loves her husband passionately and only him, but she is sister as much as wife. She is man's heaven on earth.

<sup>1</sup> Hall Caine, *Recollections*, p. 237.

This, one must admit, is even less than Victorian, it is mediaeval. Anything like intelligence, anything like an individuality of her own, anything more than being an ornament and comfort to man, is not desiderated. It is true that in his prose sketch or summary (in the manuscript) of the second sonnet of this group — see just below — Rossetti speaks of “her mental side.” But this only adds a note of unintended irony, which by the malicious may be regarded as emphasis. Those conventional Victorian sanctities of motherhood and the domestic hearth are waived in favor of an angelico-fleshly companionship. It is perhaps a small and narrow ideal, quite unsatisfying to twentieth-century woman, and it is not altogether consistent with Rossetti’s encouragement of his wife’s talent for drawing. But it calls for no easy condemnation; for Rossetti speaks only for himself and for his self-chosen life of seclusion from the “momentary momentousness” of earthly affairs. It is a biographic fact (or part of one), no more.

### I. HERSELF

To be a sweetness more desired than Spring;  
A bodily beauty more acceptable  
Than the wild rose-tree’s arch that crowns the  
fell;  
To be an essence more enviring  
Than wine’s drained juice; a music ravishing  
More than the passionate pulse of Philomel; —  
To be all this ’neath one soft bosom’s swell  
That is the flower of life: — how strange a thing!

How strange a thing to be what Man can know

But as a sacred secret! Heaven's own screen  
Hides her soul's purest depth and loveliest glow;

Closely withheld, as all things most unseen, —

The wave-bowered pearl, — the heart-shaped seal of  
green

That flecks the snowdrop underneath the snow.

The first sonnet consists of a series of comparisons celebrating her sweetness, her physical beauty, the spiritual "essence" and "music" of her being. To be all this in one woman is the flower of life — how strange a thing! For beyond all this bodily and spiritual beauty there is also the human mystery: the purest and loveliest part of her is hidden from man's sight, like many other beautiful and precious things.

Line 4 "environing," *e. g.*, pervasive ("permeating," W.M.R.). On the last lines W.M.R. has an interesting note:

This image will be clear to any one who has looked with ordinary attention at a snowdrop, and it needs no explanation. But it may be worth observing that shortly before the time when Rossetti wrote this sonnet, he was painting the picture entitled *The Daydream*. In that picture the flower now depicted is the honeysuckle; but it had originally been the snowdrop, and no doubt his recent careful observation of the snowdrop, for the purpose of his painting, was what prompted this image of "the heart-shaped seal of green" (*R. D. W.*, 222 n.).

## 2. HER LOVE

SHE loves him; for her infinite soul is Love,

And he her lodestar. Passion in her is

A glass facing his fire, where the bright bliss  
Is mirrored, and the heat returned. Yet move

That glass, a stranger's amorous flame to prove,  
And it shall turn, by instant contraries,  
Ice to the moon; while her pure fire to his  
For whom it burns, clings close i' the heart's alcove.

Lo! they are one. With wifely breast to breast  
And circling arms, she welcomes all command  
Of love, — her soul to answering ardours fann'd:  
Yet as morn springs or twilight sinks to rest,  
Ah! who shall say she deems not loveliest  
The hour of sisterly sweet hand-in-hand?

She loves him. She returns his passion, as a mirror facing the fire returns both brightness and heat; yet she returns only *his* passion — for if the mirror be turned towards a stranger it grows cold as ice in moonlight,<sup>1</sup> while still retaining its warmth for him. She is in all ways his wife, yet she prefers rather a sisterly communion than the ardors of love. "Woman's desire only awakened by desire in the object of her soul's affection — cold to all others. Her mental side also influenced by her affection" (Rossetti).

The metaphor is thus belabored and finally abandoned. No one but Rossetti or John Donne could, or would, have treated it so.

### 3. HER HEAVEN

If to grow old in Heaven is to grow young,  
(As the Seer saw and said,) then blest were he  
With youth for evermore, whose heaven should be  
True Woman, she whom these weak notes have sung.

<sup>1</sup> "Frigid as ice subjected to the moon." — W. M. R.



Here and hereafter, — choir-strains of her tongue, —  
Sky-spaces of her eyes, — sweet signs that flee  
About her soul's immediate sanctuary, —  
Were Paradise all uttermost worlds among.

The sunrise blooms and withers on the hill  
Like any hillflower; and the noblest troth  
Dies here to dust. Yet shall Heaven's promise clothe  
Even yet those lovers who have cherished still  
This test for love: — in every kiss sealed fast  
To feel the first kiss and forbode the last.

If to grow old in Heaven is to grow young, as Swedenborg said, then his is perpetual youth who finds his heaven in true woman. Here and hereafter the music of her speech, the blue sky of her eyes, the sweet tokens of love that play about her soul — these are very Paradise for him. All beauty and truth fade on earth; but they shall enjoy heaven on earth who meet this test of love: in every kiss to feel still the first kiss and to forebode the last.

(To some this would be exquisite torture, but to Rossetti it is exquisite joy. Nothing could better summarize this characteristic "intensity" of his.)

W. M. R. finds in this sonnet a prominent example of Rossetti's typical blending of ideas and imagery, and adds an elaborate explanation:

The reader's mind remains in suspense as to whether the poet is speaking of what takes place in heaven (in the ordinary sense of that term), or of what takes place on earth. It appears to me that, by strict attention to the contents of this sonnet, one finds that he only speaks of what takes place on earth. As thus:— 1, It has been said that to grow old in heaven is to grow young. 2, Accepting this, and regarding True Woman as the heaven of man on earth, we can conceive the man as per-

ennially youthful, and blest in being so. 3, Whether on earth or in any other condition of being, the heavenly elements of the woman's nature would constitute the man's Paradise. 4, It is too true that on earth everything is foredoomed to death. 5, And yet that promise of perennial youth, ascribed to life in heaven, is realized by those lovers on earth all whose kisses are reminiscent of their first kiss, and full-charged with a sense of the last. These lovers live in the tender and beautiful past, and also in the tender and solemn future" (*R. D. W.*, p. 223 n.).

All this is unquestionably in the sonnet — one of the aspects of Rossetti's "fundamental brainwork" in composition.

## LIX

*Love's Last Gift*

LOVE to his singer held a glistening leaf,  
And said: "The rose-tree and the apple-tree  
Have fruits to vaunt or flowers to lure the bee;  
And golden shafts are in the feathered sheaf  
Of the great harvest-marshal, the year's chief,  
Victorious Summer; aye, and 'neath warm sea  
Strange secret grasses lurk inviolably  
Between the filtering channels of sunk reef.

All are my blooms; and all sweet blooms of love  
To thee I gave while Spring and Summer sang;  
But Autumn stops to listen, with some pang  
From those worse things the wind is moaning of.  
Only this laurel dreads no winter days:  
Take my last gift; thy heart hath sung my praise."

Date: ?1871.

This sonnet may be regarded as an epilogue to Part I and transition to Part II, whose first sonnets, LX and LXI, are introductory.

Love's ultimate gift is the gift of song. Summer has its flowers and fruits both in the fields and beneath the sea: they are all signs and symbols of love. And Love has given him the flowers and fruit of Spring and Summer. But now comes Autumn and the premonition of Winter — the other gifts may fade, but not the laurel.

PART II  
CHANGE AND FATE



*Transfigured Life*

AS growth of form or momentary glance  
 In a child's features will recall to mind  
 The father's with the mother's face combin'd, —  
 Sweet interchange that memories still enhance:  
 And yet, as childhood's years and youth's advance,  
 The gradual mouldings leave one stamp behind,  
 Till in the blended likeness now we find  
 A separate man's or woman's countenance: —  
 So in the Song, the singer's Joy and Pain,  
 Its very parents, evermore expand  
 To bid the passion's fullgrown birth remain,  
 By Art's transfiguring essence subtly spann'd;  
 And from that song-cloud shaped as a man's hand  
 There comes the sound as of abundant rain.

Date: ?1871.

This sonnet sets forth (what Rossetti profoundly believed to be the truth concerning good poetry) that "the song" — *i. e.*, a poem — is the "transfigured life" of its author; his essential self developed into words under the control of art. The "abundant rain" of the conclusion of the sonnet is not, I think, merely "tearful emotion," but also "fertilizing and purifying influence." Tearful emotion, however, is clearly indicated in Sonnet 61, which follows on with Sonnet 60 (*R. D. W.*, pp. 224-225).

Both this sonnet and the next are introductory to Part II and should be taken, along with the prefatory sonnet to the sequence, as fragments of an *ars poetica*.

As a child's developing features suggest now the father and now the mother, but later become those of a single individual, so the poet's initial conflicting emotions are moulded into an artistic unity.

The last two lines introduce a new figure, which W. M. R. explains as follows:

I suppose it can hardly be requisite to say to English readers that this is a biblical allusion. After the three years' terrific drought, Elijah announced to Ahab that there was "a sound of abundance of rain." He then sent up his servant to the top of Mount Carmel, to watch: the servant saw "a little cloud out of the sea, like a man's hand," and it was followed by "a great rain" (1 *Kings*, ch. xviii). The accomplished French translator of *The House of Life*, Madame Clémence Couve, had evidently not perceived the allusion (*R. D. W.*, pp. 225 n.).

## LXI

*The Song-Throe*

BY thine own tears thy song must tears beget,  
 O Singer! Magic mirror thou hast none  
 Except thy manifest heart; and save thine own  
 Anguish or ardour, else no amulet.  
 Cisterned in Pride, verse is the feathery jet  
 Of soulless air-flung fountains; nay, more dry  
 Than the Dead Sea for throats that thirst and sigh,  
 That song o'er which no singer's lids grew wet.

The Song-god — He the Sun-god — is no slave  
 Of thine: thy Hunter he, who for thy soul  
 Fledges his shaft: to no august control



Of thy skilled hand his quivered store he gave:  
 But if thy lips' loud cry leap to his smart,  
 The inspir'd recoil shall pierce thy brother's heart.

Date: April 1880 (*L. and M.*, i, 368).

Only feeling in the singer (poet) can beget feeling in the hearer (reader).

Verse inspired by pride (the mere desire to write or to exhibit skill) is soulless and "insincere," though it may be light and in a sense beautiful, like the feathery jet of a fountain,<sup>1</sup> and is no more solacing to human feeling than the Dead Sea to human thirst. Apollo, the God of Song who is also the Hunter-God, aims at man's soul; and he does not surrender his arrows to the technician who is without emotion.

"Manifest heart" (l. 3) — so the poet bares or unlocks his heart. "Cisterned" is perhaps more infelicitous to American than to British readers, but it is daring at best. Possibly the allusion in the opening of the sestet to "far-darting Apollo" is in doubtful taste, but as usual it is elaborated so as to justify itself. The poet is not pursuer; he is pursued by the God of Song.

The phrase "the inspired recoil" is one of those laconisms of verse which can be rendered in prose only by a tedious circumlocution. The image presented is obviously that of an arrow from the quiver of Apollo which, after striking the poet, recoils so as to strike another person, the reader. The epithet "inspired" belongs rather to the thing imaged forth than to the image itself. It implies that the poem written under the acute poetic and personal emotion is an inspiration from the Poetic Deity (*R. D. W.*, p. 226).

<sup>1</sup> This might be the starting point for a renewal of the Byron-Bowles controversy over beauty in animate and inanimate nature; but I think Rossetti does not mean to imply any disparagement of the beauty of nature or its power to beget human emotion.

## LXII

*The Soul's Sphere*

SOME prisoned moon in steep cloud-fastnesses, —  
Throned queen and thrallèd; some dying sun whose  
pyre

Blazed with momentous memorable fire; —  
Who hath not yearned and fed his heart with these?  
Who, sleepless, hath not anguished to appease  
Tragical shadow's realm of sound and sight  
Conjectured in the lamentable night? . . .  
Lo! the soul's sphere of infinite images!

What sense shall count them? Whether it forecast  
The rose-winged hours that flutter in the van  
Of Love's unquestioning unrevealèd span, —  
Visions of golden futures: or that last  
Wild pageant of the accumulated past  
That clangs and flashes for a drowning man.

Date: ?1871.

A vivid and powerful expression of the doubts that  
haunt him.

Who hath not fed the yearning of his heart with watching  
the moon (like a queen imprisoned in clouds) or the blazing  
sunset; who hath not suffered anguish, through sleepless  
nights, facing the terrible sounds and shadows of his imagina-  
tion? And lo! "sounds" and sights are reflected in the soul as  
in a glass sphere. Who shall count them? and know if they

signify the dawn of a perfect love<sup>1</sup> or are the crowded memories that flash through a drowning man's mind?

### LXIII (xxix, 1870)

#### *Inclusiveness*

THE changing guests, each in a different mood,  
 Sit at the roadside table and arise:  
 And every life among them in likewise  
 Is a soul's board set daily with new food.  
 What man has bent o'er his son's sleep, to brood  
 How that face shall watch his when cold it lies? —  
 Or thought, as his own mother kissed his eyes,  
 Of what her kiss was when his father wooed?  
 May not this ancient room thou sitt'st in dwell  
 In separate living souls for joy or pain?  
 Nay, all its corners may be painted plain  
 Where Heaven shows pictures of some life spent well;  
 And may be stamped, a memory all in vain,  
 Upon the sight of lidless eyes in Hell.

Date: ?1860 (*R. D. W.*); ?1862-69.

The gist of the sonnet — emphasized especially in its conclusion — is that one same thing has different aspects and influences to different persons and according to different conditions (*R. D. W.*, p. 227 n.).

At the roadside table (of an inn) new guests, each in a different mood, are continually coming and going; and each of these guests is himself a soul before which new food is set

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<sup>1</sup> "Love's unquestioned unrevealed span," *i. e.*, "that section of human life and emotion which pertains to Love, with all its multiplex and varied evolution, equally unquestioned by the human spirit, and unrevealed to it beforehand" (*R. D. W.*, p. 227 n.).

daily. A man bending over his sleeping son will wonder in what circumstances *his* son will in turn watch him when *he* is dead. A man will wonder, as his mother kisses his eyes, what her kisses were like when his father wooed. This very room lives in the joyful or unhappy memory of other persons; for one, in Heaven, it may be the image of a well-spent life; for another, in Hell, it may be the ineffaceable image of a wasted life.

I have changed the questions of the original without, I think, altering the sense.

The Inclusiveness (variegatedness, or, as W. M. R. suggests, many-sidedness) of life is presented under four guises; first, the table of an inn to which come ever new guests who are themselves always changing; second, the father thinking of his death; third, a man thinking of his father's wooing; fourth, a certain room and what it has meant in the lives of others. The idea is a familiar one and not at all difficult to grasp; the difficulty lay in compressing it into a sonnet, and in this Rossetti has not been altogether successful. The octave is overcrowded and the choice of illustration rather strange. The first example is easy, but strained by being, so to say, "squared" — laborious orient ivory, sphere in sphere. The second is morbid and almost pathological. The third is (heaven forgive the word) downright Freudian. The last moves more freely in its six lines, but it is cumbered by the unnecessary indirection of line 12.

R. D. W., page 293, gives the date of this sonnet as ?1860; while on page 228 of the same book W. M. R. notes apropos of "this ancient room" (l. 9): "I suppose this refers to an actual room in Rossetti's old-fashioned house, 16 Cheyne Walk, Chelsea." But Rossetti did not live in Tudor House, Cheyne Walk, until after his wife's death in 1862. The inconsistency is not serious, however, since the evidence either way is so tenuous.

## LXIV

*Ardour and Memory*

THE cuckoo-throb, the heartbeat of the Spring;  
 The rosebud's blush that leaves it as it grows  
 Into the full-eyed fair unblushing rose;  
 The summer clouds that visit every wing  
 With fires of sunrise and of sunseting;  
 The furtive flickering streams to light re-born  
 'Mid airs new-fledged and valorous lusts of morn,  
 While all the daughters of the daybreak sing: —

These ardour loves, and memory: and when flown  
 All joys, and through dark forest-boughs in flight  
 The wind swoops onward brandishing the light,  
 Even yet the rose-tree's verdure left alone  
 Will flush all ruddy though the rose be gone;  
 With ditties and with dirges infinite.

Date: "Xmas 1879" (facsimile of MS., facing page 426 of William Sharp).

The sonnet begins well, but with the sixth verse becomes unduly difficult.

These phrases [says W. M. R.] are easier to appreciate undefinedly than to paraphrase precisely. The morning's "airs new-fledged" are (I suppose) airs or breezes as full of fresh animation as are new-fledged birds<sup>1</sup> — or indeed airs wherein

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<sup>1</sup> [Are new-fledged birds, as a fact, full of fresh animation? They are often rather timid and sluggish. — New-fledged means young, young means fresh and vigorous; *ergo*, "airs new-fledged" is a 'faded' metaphor, one whose original or literal sense is to be discarded.]

new-fledged birds actually disport themselves. "Valorous lusts" might be synonymized as "healthy enjoying activities." The "daughters of the daybreak" I understand to be in some sense, the powers and ministering spirits of the new day (*R. D. W.*, p. 228 n.).

Ardour and Memory love these beauties of Spring; and in Autumn, when all joys are flown and the wind sweeps through the dark forest with infinite (strange) songs and dirges, in the shifting lights (of sunset through the wind-swept trees) the green of the rose-tree catches a ruddy glow like that of the roses that are gone.

This is the best I can do with the wind "brandishing the light"; and I "supply" the sunset. W. M. R. leaves us to appreciate these lines quite undefinedly. William Sharp found the last line to be "without sense"; but this is hardly true. The difficulty lies in the separation of the prepositional phrases from the word they modify ("wind") three lines above. But he calls the sonnet "a beautiful illustration from nature to express the 'after-glow' that memory inherits from youthful ardour" (p. 426). W. M. R. glosses "ardour" as "anticipation" — which I do not understand.

The meaning of the whole seems to be: in autumn we cherish the memories of spring and summer, and even allow imagination to discover new beauties. The sonnet is thus another example of Rossetti's way of presenting the data, a set of symbols, and leaving the reader to construct the allegory for himself. Spring and summer are seasons of ardor; when these are gone, autumn follows (darkness, sunset). When one's life is spent, exhausted, one clings desperately to memories and is even inclined to find the old joys where they do not exist.

LXV (xxx, 1870)

*Known in Vain*

As two whose love, first foolish, widening scope,  
Knows suddenly, with music high and soft,  
The Holy of holies; who because they scoff'd  
Are now amazed with shame, nor dare to cope  
With the whole truth aloud, lest heaven should ope;  
Yet, at their meetings, laugh not as they laugh'd  
In speech; nor speak, at length; but sitting oft  
Together, within hopeless sight of hope  
For hours are silent: — So it happeneth  
When Work and Will awake too late, to gaze  
After their life sailed by, and hold their breath.  
Ah! who shall dare to search through what sad maze  
Thenceforth their incommunicable ways  
Follow the desultory feet of Death?

Date: W. M. R. is again contradictory: in *R. D. W.* he gives the date as ?1857; in *L. and M.*, i, 167, he is explicit for 1853. The latter is probably correct.

The essential point in this sonnet requires reflection rather than explanation. The idea is that of a man who in youth has been feeble in will, indolent and scattered, but who, when too late, wakes up to the duty and privileges of work. Without insisting overmuch upon its value in an autobiographical relation, one can scarcely doubt that this sonnet was written by its author in a moment of some self-reproach — with a sense of faculties untrained and opportunities slighted (*R. D. W.*, p. 229).

In his Memoir (*l. c.*) W. M. R. calls the sonnet “more or less autobiographical,” and fills in the background



with reflections on Rossetti's "desultory" application to the study of art in his early years. It is worth noting that, if the later date is correct (see above), there might be some correspondence with Rossetti's tragic rejected love; but the story of the two lovers here is not told with the energy of a wrung heart; rather it is sketched as if merely to supply a comparison.

"Incommunicable ways" (l. 13) is explained by W. M. R.: "the footsteps of two never treading together the same path."

The riming of "laugh'd" with "soft" and "scoff'd" is hardly to be praised. But the last lines are among Rossetti's best. And he himself so regarded the whole sonnet.<sup>1</sup>

## LXVI

### *The Heart of the Night*

FROM child to youth; from youth to arduous man;  
From lethargy to fever of the heart;  
From faithful life to dream-dowered days apart;  
From trust to doubt; from doubt to brink of ban; —  
Thus much of change in one swift cycle ran  
Till now. Alas, the soul! — how soon must she  
Accept her primal immortality, —  
The flesh resume its dust whence it began?

O Lord of work and peace! O Lord of life!  
O Lord, the awful Lord of will! though late,  
Even yet renew this soul with duteous breath:

<sup>1</sup> Hall Caine, *Recollections*, p. 237.

That when the peace is garnered in from strife,  
 The work retrieved, the will regenerate,  
 This soul may see thy face, O Lord of death!

Date: ?1874 (*R. D. W.*).

"This sonnet reads throughout as being an intense personal utterance: I assume it to be so" (*R. D. W.*, p. 230 n.). Except as such it has very little interest. Though probably written twenty years later, it belongs naturally with the preceding sonnet.

He reviews the changes that his life has brought and asks how long it will be before his soul returns to its "primal immortality," the flesh to dust. Then he prays that his life may be renewed (so that at length he may face death peacefully), his work retrieved, his will strengthened.

Line 3 seems to W. M. R. to "refer to the change which came over the author's life with the death of his wife — yet I can by no means *assert* this" (*R. D. W.*, p. 230 n.). The next line would have reference to Rossetti's well-known suspicions of his closest friends, suspicions generally attributed to the evil effects of chloral. "Brink of ban" is infelicitous; "ban" is a blend of "reprobation" (W. M. R.) and "banishment."

## LXVII (xxxI, 1870)

### *The Landmark*

WAS *that* the landmark? What, — the foolish well  
 Whose wave, low down, I did not stoop to drink,  
 But sat and flung the pebbles from its brink  
 In sport to send its imaged skies pell-mell,

(And mine own image, had I noted well!) —

Was that my point of turning? — I had thought  
The stations of my course should rise unsought,  
As altar-stone or ensigned citadel.

But lo! the path is missed, I must go back,  
And thirst to drink when next I reach the spring  
Which once I stained, which since may have grown black.  
Yet though no light be left nor bird now sing  
As here I turn, I'll thank God, hastening,  
That the same goal is still on the same track.

Date: 1854 (Page).

He discovers that an apparently unimportant event in his career (a "foolish well" where he had stopped to drink) was a landmark or turning-point; though he had supposed that landmarks were more conspicuous and lordly affairs. But just there he missed the right path and he must go back. It is dark now and no birds sing, but he thanks God that the same goal he failed to reach is still there. May the "well" be that of Willowwood?

The sonnet is composed largely in a conversational key, somewhat *à la* Browning, under whose influence Rossetti occasionally wrote in his earlier years. The last line of the octave and the reminiscence (l. 12) of "*La Belle Dame sans Merci*" (one of his favorite poems) stand out rather inappropriately.

The meaning of the sonnet is almost too general to warrant our attaching any very definite autobiographical significance to it. But it seems to have reference to one of Rossetti's periodic resolves to abandon painting for poetry, or poetry for painting; in 1854 the latter choice.

In an earlier version lines 6, 7 preserved the *b* rime.

## LXVIII (xxxii, 1870)

*A Dark Day*

THE gloom that breathes upon me with these airs  
Is like the drops which strike the traveller's brow  
Who knows not, darkling, if they bring him now  
Fresh storm, or be old rain the covert bears.  
Ah! bodes this hour some harvest of new tares,  
Or hath but memory of the day whose plough  
Sowed hunger once,—the night at length when thou,  
O prayer found vain, didst fall from out my prayers?  
How prickly were the growths which yet how smooth,  
Along the hedgerows of this journey shed,  
Lie by Time's grace till night and sleep may soothe!  
Even as the thistledown from pathsides dead  
Gleaned by a girl in autumns of her youth,  
Which one new year makes soft her marriage-bed.

Date: 1855 (*Letters to Allingham*, p. 102).

Is my gloom, he asks, the forerunner of more grief or the memory of old sorrows? Yet the rough and harsh often become smooth with time.

This is an unusually "well-built" sonnet, and in detail is characteristic of Rossetti's involved (but not over-involved) writing. I transcribe W. M. R.'s paraphrase (the square brackets are also his):

The gloom which breathes upon me with these breezes is like the rain-drops which strike the brow of the traveller, who, being in darkness or shadow, knows not whether the rain-drops are now bringing him a fresh storm, or on the contrary

are but old rain which the covert bears. Ah does this present hour bode some harvest of new tares (tribulations and disappointments)? or does it merely retain the memory of that day whose plough once sowed hunger in my heart — of that night when at length thou, O prayer of mine found vain, didst drop from among my prayers? [Perhaps there is room for some better hope: for consider.] How prickly were those growths which yet, now so smooth, shed along the hedgerows of this journey [this actual present journey, and, symbolically through that, the past journey of my life], are lying, by Time's grace, until night and sleep may afford their solace! Even as the thistledown, gleaned from path-sides of the time dead and past, by some girl, in autumn-seasons of her youth, — thistle-down which, in some new year, is to make soft her marriage-bed (*R. D. W.*, p. 231).

"Sowed hunger once" (l. 7): "I believe this used to stand *since*. Which is better?"— Rossetti to W. M. R., 14 September, 1869 (*L. and M.*, ii, 216). It is perhaps useless to speculate on the precise reference in the "prayer found vain" (l. 8). "The last simile," wrote Rossetti to Allingham, "I heard as a fact common in some parts of the country."

## LXIX

### *Autumn Idleness*

THIS sunlight shames November where he grieves  
 In dead red leaves, and will not let him shun  
 The day, though bough with bough be over-run.  
 But with a blessing every glade receives  
 High salutation; while from hillock-eaves  
 The deer gaze calling, dappled white and dun,  
 As if, being foresters of old, the sun  
 Had marked them with the shade of forest-leaves.

Here dawn to-day unveiled her magic glass;

Here noon now gives the thirst and takes the dew;  
Till eve bring rest when other good things pass.

And here the lost hours the lost hours renew  
While I still lead my shadow o'er the grass,  
Nor know, for longing, that which I should do.

Date: 1850 (William Sharp, p. 27, and *Rossetti Papers*, p. 468, give 1869); in a letter to his brother in 1869, Rossetti called it an "old" sonnet (*L. and M.*, ii, 216). The Fitzwilliam MS. has: "A Sunny Day at the Close of Autumn dated Sevenoaks, Nov. 1850."<sup>1</sup> In the 1870 volume it appeared among "Sonnets for Pictures and Other Sonnets."

William Sharp calls it "perhaps on the whole the most flawless of all Rossetti's 'natural' poems, perfect from the first line to the last" (pp. 426-427). Others may feel that the figure in lines 1-2 and the comparison in lines 7-8, being fanciful rather than imaginative, fall a little short of perfection.

The picture of autumn is followed, in the second tercet, by a personal reference in the musically splendid line,

And here the lost hours the lost hours renew.

W. M. R. takes this to mean "here do I lose hour after hour"; but adds in a foot-note (p. 232): "There may be something implied to the following effect also — Here do I lose hours dreaming over other hours lost in the distant past. Madame Couve puts this sense tersely — 'On revit ainsi les défunes heures.'"

<sup>1</sup> I owe this fact to Mr. Page; as also the statement concerning the *b* rimes of LXVII.

## LXX (xxxiii, 1870)

*The Hill Summit*

THIS feast-day of the sun, his altar there  
In the broad west has blazed for vesper-song;  
And I have loitered in the vale too long  
And gaze now a belated worshipper.  
Yet may I not forget that I was 'ware,  
So journeying, of his face at intervals  
Transfigured where the fringed horizon falls, —  
A fiery bush with coruscating hair.

And now that I have climbed and won this height,  
I must tread downward through the sloping shade  
And travel the bewildered tracks till night.  
Yet for this hour I still may here be stayed  
And see the gold air and the silver fade  
And the last bird fly into the last light.

Date: Written in 1853, revised and transferred to  
"The House of Life" in 1869 (*Letters to Allingham*,  
pp. 45-46; *L. and M.*, ii, 218).

In its immediate primary meaning, this sonnet manifestly describes a resplendent day nearing its close, and the poet, on a day-long journey, contemplating the sunset from a height: and I have no doubt the sonnet was the direct outcome of such an incident.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, I am equally satisfied that the implied or analogous meaning is likewise intentional —

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<sup>1</sup> Rossetti to Allingham, of this sonnet: "Here's one which I remember writing in great glory on the top of a hill I reached one after-sunset in Warwickshire last year. I'm afraid, though, it isn't much good."



that of a career which, having reached its shining culmination, has thereafter to decline into the shade, and close in the night of the tomb (*R. D. W.*, pp. 232-233).

The last two lines of the octave are condensed to the point of obscurity. The meaning is: during the day I had seen the sun through shrubbery or among treetops; the sun's face was somehow transfigured and the effect was that of a fiery bush with coruscating hair.

The earlier version read:

Where the whole land to its horizon falls,  
Some fiery bush with corruscating [*sic*] hair.

The next two lines read at first:

And now that I have climbed and tread this height,  
I may lie down where all the slope is shade.

A painter's eye is discernible in "the gold air and the silver" (l. 13) — the yellow sunset followed by that peculiar light which is blue-gray but seems almost white.

LXXI, LXXII, LXXIII (xxxv-xxxvii, 1870)

### *The Choice*

Date: 1847-48 (*L. and M.*, i, 108).

In this trio of sonnets, *The Choice*, three theories of human life are presented. Each of the three theories is based on one simple and irrefragable consideration, "To-morrow thou shalt die." In Sonnet 1 the deduction is "Eat and drink" — the theory of physical enjoyment. In Sonnet 2 the deduction is "Watch and fear" — the theory of religious asceticism. In Sonnet 3 the deduction is "Think and act" — the theory of self-development. These sonnets were written at a very

early age; probably about 1847, or when the author was from eighteen to nineteen years of age, at a time when

"The world was all before him, where to choose."

From the tone of the sonnets it will be obvious that he gave, in anticipation, the preference to "Think and act"; in performance he gave the same preference. But this was never because he *ignored* the other two theories; he only refused them co-equal rank (*R. D. W.*, pp. 233-234).

[These sonnets] have a width of application, an impersonality of utterance not characteristic of the greater number of the author's sonnets in *The House of Life*; especially noteworthy are the bitter lines closing the first, and the beautiful sestet of the third, which gives a greater idea of immeasurable distance than any other passage I can recollect (William Sharp, p. 427).

Rossetti had some hesitation about including "The Choice" in "The House of Life."<sup>1</sup> The sonnets do not fit well with the rest, especially in thought. From the very first sonnet of the sequence, the choice had been made: all for love.

It is possible to regard these sonnets (with W. M. R.) as the poet's early inquiry as he faces the world, recognizing that he must choose; but, on the other hand, it is quite as likely that they are also a literary exercise. One distinguishes slight echoes of Browning here and there, quite apart from the "borrowing" mentioned below. The first is easily the best. It has many of Rossetti's artistic virtues and none of his later mannerisms. It is both simple and sensuous.

<sup>1</sup> *L. and M.*, ii, 204, 219; *Rossetti Papers*, p. 454. In reply to his first query, W. M. R. wrote back: "I incline to the admission of these sonnets." After receiving this mild affirmative, Rossetti still wrote (15 September, 1869): "I still have a grudge to the three sonnets called *The Choice*. Do you feel sure they ought to be in?"

## I

EAT thou and drink; to-morrow thou shalt die.  
Surely the earth, that's wise being very old,  
Needs not our help. Then loose me, love, and hold  
Thy sultry hair up from my face; that I  
May pour for thee this golden wine, brim-high,  
Till round the glass thy fingers glow like gold.  
We'll drown all hours: thy song, while hours are toll'd,  
Shall leap, as fountains veil the changing sky.  
Now kiss, and think that there are really those,  
My own high-bosomed beauty, who increase  
Vain gold, vain lore, and yet might choose our way!  
Through many years they toil; then on a day  
They die not,—for their life was death,—but cease;  
And round their narrow lips the mould falls close.

## 2

WATCH thou and fear; to-morrow thou shalt die.  
Or art thou sure thou shalt have time for death?  
Is not the day which God's word promiseth  
To come man knows not when? In yonder sky,  
Now while we speak, the sun speeds forth: can I  
Or thou assure him of his goal? God's breath  
Even at this moment haply quickeneth  
The air to a flame; till spirits, always nigh  
Though screened and hid, shall walk the daylight here.  
And dost thou prate of all that man shall do?  
Canst thou, who hast but plagues, presume to be  
Glad in his gladness that comes after thee?  
Will *his* strength slay *thy* worm in Hell? Go to:  
Cover thy countenance, and watch, and fear.

## 3

THINK thou and act; to-morrow thou shalt die.

Outstretched in the sun's warmth upon the shore,  
 Thou say'st: "Man's measured path is all gone o'er:  
 Up all his years, steeply, with strain and sigh,  
 Man clomb until he touched the truth; and I,  
 Even I, am he whom it was destined for."

How should this be? Art thou then so much more  
 Than they who sowed, that thou shouldst reap thereby?

Nay, come up hither. From this wave-washed mound  
 Unto the furthest flood-brim look with me;  
 Then reach on with thy thought till it be drown'd.

Miles and miles distant though the last line be,  
 And though thy soul sail leagues and leagues beyond, —  
 Still, leagues beyond those leagues, there is more sea.

In the 1870 version the second tercet of No. I ran thus:

Through many days they toil; then comes a day  
 They die not, — never having lived, — but cease;  
 And round their narrow lips the mould falls close.

The later changes are not clearly improvements.

W. M. R. raised a question about the earlier reading of line 11; Rossetti replied:

"Care, gold, and care," can be altered to "Vain gold, vain lore," which meets your views. There is a very vexatious point connected with this sonnet which was one reason for my thinking of omitting the three. The idea, "They die not, never having lived," is identical with one at the close of Browning's *In a Gondola*. I know that I had never then read that poem, and that on first reading it this annoying fact struck me at once; but then this is not known to the world. The point is just what is wanted, and not possible to alter (*L. and M.*, ii, 210).

The last three lines of Browning's poem (published 1842) are:

The three, I do not scorn  
To death, because they never lived: but I  
Have lived indeed, and so — (yet one more kiss) — can die!

No. 2 is less good. The sarcasm of the second line is somewhat weak; the middle of the sonnet is rather thin; and only in the last lines does a sort of *saeva indignatio* rise to the necessary rhetorical height.

No. 3 is an exhortation against lotos-eaters:

Let no man lie back contentedly along the shore and say:  
after the long arduous climb of human development, here we  
are, here I am. Nay, look out across the ocean and beyond; —  
still farther there is more sea. (The soul, if not the body, has  
yet greater development ahead.)

Both the subject and the execution demand more energy of language than (I think) Rossetti here displays. He declines rhetoric, but brings no substitute.

"Flood-brim" (l. 10) is curious as being like the old Anglo-Saxon compounds; so also "sky-breadth" and "field-silence" in LXXIV (l. 6).

## LXXIV, LXXV, LXXVI

### *Old and New Art*

Date: 1849 (*L. and M.*, i, 144).

Like the three preceding sonnets, these are early work, and likewise rather out of place in "The House of Life." W. M. R. comments:

These three sonnets testify to a highly religious (not necessarily dogmatic) view of the function of the Art, to love of old painters, and revolt against the more modern ones, and to a

modest and yet resolute desire to aid in reinstating the Art in its legitimate place. The spirit which animates the sonnets is that of a man destined to dare and do, and to overcome (*L. and M.*, i, 144).

## I. ST. LUKE THE PAINTER

GIVE honor unto Luke Evangelist;  
For he it was (the aged legends say)  
Who first taught Art to fold her hands and pray.  
Scarcely at once she dared to rend the mist  
Of devious symbols: but soon having wist  
How sky-breadth and field-silence and this day  
Are symbols also in some deeper way,  
She looked through these to God and was God's priest.  
And if, past noon, her toil began to irk,  
And she sought talismans, and turned in vain  
To soulless self-reflections of man's skill, —  
Yet now, in this the twilight, she might still  
Kneel in the latter grass to pray again,  
Ere the night cometh and she may not work.

Give honor to St. Luke the Evangelist, who according to legend was the founder of a true religious art. At first, to be sure, it was impossible to escape from the old formal symbolism; but soon the beauties of nature (sky-breadth and field-silence) were felt as divine symbols of a more profound kind. Later (about 1500, say), art became soulless and artificial again. Yet now in this our present twilight of art the earlier religious spirit may return.

This is of course a simple statement of that part of Pre-Raphaelite doctrine which laid special stress on the quasi-historical aspect of the "movement."

## 2. NOT AS THESE

"I AM not as these are," the poet saith  
In youth's pride, and the painter, among men  
At bay, where never pencil comes nor pen,  
And shut about with his own frozen breath.  
To others, for whom only rhyme wins faith  
As poets, — only paint as painter, — then  
He turns in the cold silence; and again  
Shrinking, "I am not as these are," he saith.

And say that this is so, what follows it?  
For were thine eyes set backwards in thine head,  
Such words were well, but they see on, and far.  
Unto the lights of the great Past, new-lit  
Fair for the Future's track, look thou instead, —  
Say thou instead, "I am not as *these* are."

The proud young poet or painter, in the frigid atmosphere of Philistia, shrugs and says: "I am not like these men." And also, among other poets and painters who work only for glory, he shrugs and says: "I am not like these men." This would be well enough if one looked backward only. But one must look to the future, and then, thinking of the truly great poets and painters of the past, say: "I am not like *these* men."

There is something like eighteenth-century "wit" in the way this sonnet is turned, or even the seventeenth-century George Herbert.



## 3. THE HUSBANDMAN

THOUGH God, as one that is an householder,  
Called these to labor in His vineyard first,  
Before the husk of darkness was well burst  
Bidding them grope their way out and bestir,  
(Who, questioned of their wages, answered, "Sir,  
Unto each man a penny":) though the worst  
Burthen of heat was theirs and the dry thirst:  
Though God hath since found none such as these were  
To do their work like them: — Because of this  
Stand not ye idle in the market-place.

Which of ye knoweth *he* is not that last  
Who may be first by faith and will? — yea, his  
The hand which after the appointed days  
And hours shall give a Future to their Past?

This is an adaptation or extension of the parable of the Vineyard to the early pre-Raphael painters usually called the Primitives and Early Italians, and in the sonnet referred to as "these" (ll. 2, 8). In the context "these" are "the lights of the great Past" (l. 12 of the preceding sonnet).

We of the present, says the poet, are not to stand idly by "in the market-place"; for though we come last, we may be first, *i. e.*, deserve and win the full hire, become a worthy future to their past.

This is perhaps the best of the three; it is simple, and strikes an easy balance between the colloquial and the dignified, and it has at least one good line. Though the use of the parable may seem daring to some, to Rossetti it is natural and implies no want of reverence. In truth, Art was probably more sacred to him than the words spoken by Jesus.

## LXXVII

*Soul's Beauty*

UNDER the arch of Life, where love and death,  
Terror and mystery, guard her shrine, I saw  
Beauty enthroned; and though her gaze struck awe,  
I drew it in as simply as my breath.  
Hers are the eyes which, over and beneath,  
The sky and sea bend on thee, — which can draw,  
By sea or sky or woman, to one law,  
The allotted bondman of her palm and wreath.

This is that Lady Beauty, in whose praise  
Thy voice and hand shake still, — long known to thee  
By flying hair and fluttering hem, — the beat  
Following her daily of thy heart and feet,  
How passionately and irretrievably,  
In what fond flight, how many ways and days!

Date: *ca.* 1866; 1864-68 (*L. and M.*, i, 270 f.).

This sonnet was written for Rossetti's picture *Sibylla Palmifera*, and was published under that title (together with "Lady Lilith," no. LXXVIII) in a pamphlet-review, "Notes on the Royal Academy Exhibition," by Swinburne and W. M. R. in the spring of 1868 (*L. and M.*, i, 270 f.; W. M. R., *Bibliography*, pp. 14 f.). This and "Lady Lilith" were printed in *Poems*, 1870, among the "Sonnets for Pictures." Afterwards it occurred to Rossetti to contrast the two as representatives of fleshly and spiritual beauty, and thus they were transferred to "The House of Life" in 1881. Among Rossetti's paint-

ings the head of Mary Magdalene is a rival as a type of spiritual beauty, as the Monna Vanna of physical loveliness.

The picture *Sibylla Palmifera* is reproduced by Marillier, facing page 144; on page 143 there is this description:

The sonnet describes the picture partly — a Sibyl bearing a branch of palm, and seated on a throne beneath a stone canopy overlooking a temple court. Above her head is carved on one side a blinded cupid wreathed with roses; on the other a skull, crowned with red poppies. She herself is robed in crimson, with chestnut brown hair drawn away from her forehead, and a dark green coif trailing from her head over her left shoulder. A burning censer, a flaming lamp, and two butterflies hovering near are all accessories in the picture, which so far as the face is concerned differs from most other Rossettis, even those done from the same model, Miss Wilding.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a short account of Alexa Wilding, cf. *L. and M.*, i, 242. I take the following description of the painting from William Sharp, pp. 201 f.: "The palm-bearing Sibyl sits in a kind of stone alcove forming the arch of Life, above her head on the right being a sculptured Cupid, with blinded eyes and wreathed with a crown of fresh roses; on the left, a carven stone skull, wreathed also, but with symbolical poppies, heavy and richly red. Her oval face, with its steadfast in-looking eyes, looks full from the picture, and her long soft brown hair is drawn back, leaving the clear forehead uncovered, but droops again with the grace of vine tendrils over the right shoulder. She is clad in a deep lake-red robe, with white lawn undersleeves, and a dark green veil round the back of her head and below the neck, and trailing over the left shoulder, and in her right hand she holds the palm branch. Behind her is a round brazen vessel with incense burning, and two butterflies (one golden and one reddish in hue) hovering above, and on her right stands a curious antique lamp palely flaming. But above any beauty of harmonious colouring, transcending any recognition of the thorough technique throughout, is the impression given from the expression of the Sibyl, so earnest, so consecrated, so superior to the ordinary half-doubting gaze of humanity. . . . It is doubtful if anything more strictly *impressive* ever came from Rossetti's studio."

Stephens (p. 153) describes the painting thus: "*Sibylla Palmifera*,

The picture was commissioned in 1865, begun in 1866, and finished in 1870.

The octave of the sonnet presents the Soul's Beauty enshrined and enthroned and declares her power manifested both in nature and in woman. The sestet reveals the poet as one of her "allotted bondmen." "Thee" in line 6 should be taken — so W. M. R. — to mean "men in general"; "Thy" in line 10 refers directly to the poet.<sup>1</sup> W. M. R. explains "By flying hair and fluttering hem" (l. 11), "Beauty cannot be caught and captured — it is ever illusive and beyond the grasp"; *qu.* for "illusive" read "elusive"; and is there not also an implicit reference to "sea or sky or woman" (l. 7)?

### LXXVIII

#### *Body's Beauty*

OF Adam's first wife, Lilith, it is told

(The witch he loved before the gift of Eve,)

That, ere the snake's, her sweet tongue could deceive,  
And her enchanted hair was the first gold.

the noble seated figure of a virgin, quiet and pale, as if long absorbed in the contemplation of the mysteries of life and thought, and holding a palm before a shrine, while at her side burns a lamp whose steadfast flame rises towards a garland of roses which hangs near the sculptured head of a cherub; on the other side is a thurible, from which smoke ascends slowly in circles, towards a Death's-head, over which is suspended a wreath of poppies. Above the sibyl's head hangs a festoon of olive boughs, and carved in a niche is a sphinx, with other emblems of mysteries. Two butterflies, one of gold, the other of a carnation tint, whose significance may be easily imagined, hover near the sibyl's shoulder."

<sup>1</sup> For other sonnets in which "thy" = "my," cf. *xxi*, *xxxvi*, *xlvi*, *lxxi*, *lxxii*, *lxxiii*, *xcvi* (?) *xcvii* (?).

And still she sits, young while the earth is old,  
 And, subtly of herself contemplative,  
 Draws men to watch the bright web she can weave,  
 Till heart and body and life are in its hold.

The rose and poppy are her flowers; for where  
 Is he not found, O Lilith, whom shed scent  
 And soft-shed kisses and soft sleep shall snare?  
 Lo! as that youth's eyes burned at thine, so went  
 Thy spell through him, and left his straight neck bent  
 And round his heart one strangling golden hair.

Date: 1864-68 (*L. and M.*, i, 270 f.).

See note on the preceding sonnet.

The picture *Lady Lilith* was begun in 1864. In August 1868 Rossetti wrote to his mother: "I have been working chiefly at the *Toilette* picture [*Lilith*], and at the one with the gold sleeve [*Monna Vanna*]. . . . The former will, I think, be my best picture hitherto" (*L. and M.*, ii, 188). A reproduction of *Lady Lilith* may be found in *Marillier*, facing page 133. The model was Mrs. Schott (Fanny Cornforth), whom W. M. R. refers to as Mrs. H;<sup>1</sup> afterwards Rossetti repainted the face from Miss Wilding, to the detriment of the picture. *Marillier* (pp. 132-133) describes *Lady Lilith* thus:

A beautiful woman, splendidly and voluptuously formed, is leaning back on a couch combing her long fair hair, while with cold dispassionateness she surveys her features in a hand mirror. She is not only the Lilith of Adam, the Lilith who in "*Eden Bower*" makes that weird compact with the serpent, but the Lilith of all time; lovely but loveless, amorous and

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<sup>1</sup> There is a little mystery about William Michael's account of her, but this is not the place to discuss the point. Cf. *L. and M.*, i, 202 f.

deadly. She herself was a serpent first, and knows the gift of fascination. Bowered in roses, robed in white flowing draperies that slip and reveal the swelling contour of her bust and shoulders, no painter has ever idealized like this the elemental power of carnal loveliness.<sup>1</sup>

The first quatrain sketches the story of Lilith. The second directs us to her picture. The first tercet continues the picture with (so to say) its obverse, the men whom she entices. The second tercet turns from the generalized victims to "that youth" who was Adam.<sup>2</sup>

A few textual notes may be useful. With line 5 compare Pater's famous description of the Mona Lisa. "Subtly of herself contemplative":<sup>3</sup> this is the keynote of the painting. "The bright web" W. M. R. glosses:

<sup>1</sup> "It may with tolerable certainty be affirmed that nine out of ten painters prior to Rossetti would have represented Lilith as the legendary first wife of Adam *pur et simple*, and it shows the original and poetic bent of his genius that he should have pictured her seated in what might be a modern boudoir, and she herself as a beautiful woman of this or any time, not in the act of fascinating any son of Adam or preparing her subtle wiles, but simply as rapt in the contemplation of her own beauty, cognizant of her own voluptuous passions and those she can excite at will, yet never carried away by her ardours, permeated with the spirit of insatiable desire yet alien to love, only wondering at and never quite fathoming the secret of her being and the depths of her influence, a perfect physical woman but soulless as Lamia, yet animated by an immortal spirit" (William Sharp, pp. 208-209). Compare also Stephens (p. 163): "She has passion without love, and languor without satiety; energy without heart, and beauty without tenderness or sympathy for others — for her lovers least of all. . . . The expression of the witch's face is, in the water-colour version, at once more amorous and more cruel than that of the picture in oil."

<sup>2</sup> Possibly "that youth" merely refers back to "he" in l. 10; in which case the sestet is a single unit.

<sup>3</sup> Stephens has "by herself," and other variants: "net" for "web" (l. 7); "soft-shed sleep" for "soft sleep" (l. 11). His footnote (p. 159) is slightly cryptic: "The sonnet written on the frame of that version of this picture which belonged to the late Mr. F. Leyland (Burlington Club, 1883, No. 47) is not quite the same as this."

"her outcombed hair." But this, so prominent in the picture, is surely only a visible token of that other snare of hers. The rose and poppy are love and sleep. For "kisses" (l. 11) on the margin of the picture stood "fingers" (which was fleshly indeed). In *Notes on the Royal Academy Exhibition* line 9 reads: "Rose, foxglove, poppy, are her flowers: for where" (cf. Buxton Forman, p. 202).

Rossetti's knowledge of Lilith was probably not very extensive, and in truth very little is known about her, or said about her, even in rabbinical lore. Rossetti may have found her first in Burton (of the *Anatomy*), who says: "The Talmudists say that Adam had a wife called Lillis before he married Eve, and of her he begat nothing but devils." But his acquaintance seems to have been based chiefly upon Goethe's reference to her in the *Walpurgisnacht*. In 1866 W. M. R. made him a transcript of the quatrain beginning "Nimm dich in Acht" (*Faust*, i, 3764 ff.), which Rossetti translated as follows:

Hold thou thy heart against her shining hair,  
 If, by thy fate, she spread it once for thee;  
 For, when she nets a young man in her snare,  
 So twines she him he never may be free.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Collected Works, ii, 469. Cf. also L. A. Willoughby, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and German Literature* (1912), pp. 27 ff. For Shelley's translation of these lines, cf. Globe edition, p. 659 ("Scenes from Goethe's *Faust*"). On Lilith one may see further L. Hearn, *Pre-Raphaelite and Other Poets*, pp. 73 f., and Rossetti's poem, "Eden Bower"; also *Notes and Queries*, 6th Ser., viii (1883), pp. 296, 354; and ix (1884), pp. 3, 177 (with various references). The more curious may read, further, Moncure Conway's *Lilith, Adam's First Wife*.



## LXXIX

*The Monochord*

Is it this sky's vast vault or ocean's sound  
That is Life's self and draws my life from me,  
And by instinct ineffable decree  
Holds my breath quailing on the bitter bound?  
Nay, is it Life or Death, thus thunder-crowned,  
That 'mid the tide of all emergency  
Now notes my separate wave, and to what sea  
Its difficult eddies labour in the ground?

Oh! what is this that knows the road I came,  
The flame turned cloud, the cloud returned to flame,  
The lifted shifted steeps and all the way? —  
That draws round me at last this wind-warm space,  
And in regenerate rapture turns my face  
Upon the devious coverts of dismay?

Date: ?1868-70 (Tisdell).

In his own copy of the 1870 Poems (Tauchnitz edition), in which he was accustomed to enter changes of the text, Rossetti wrote above this sonnet: "That sublimated mood of the soul in which a separate essence of itself seems to oversoar and survey it."<sup>1</sup> In other words, the sonnet expresses the power of music to raise the great questions of existence, Life and Death, with their application to the individual existence; and also, while inducing a mood of introspection, to soften old memories and present pain. It is a prime example of poetry

<sup>1</sup> Hall Caine, *Recollections*, p. 133, n. 1.

striving towards the condition of music — and almost ceasing to be intelligible. W. M. R. thinks it the most obscure of the series; there can be no doubt about the difficulty of the octave.

The title may be disregarded for the moment. First, it is necessary to know that the sonnet was inspired by Rossetti's listening to a certain piece of music; it is therefore the monument of a musical moment.<sup>1</sup> Second, throughout the octave, two images or ideas are kept, as it were, in solution — now one, now the other, being brought forward: the sounds of the heard music and the picture of sky and ocean suggested to his imagination by the music. The whole sonnet is a series of questions; the poet asks first,

What is this life that daily, hourly, takes my life from me and yet by some inherent and mysterious law holds me, quailing, to itself? Is it akin to the vast vault of the sky or to the deep-moving sound of the sea? (At the same time his question implies: What is this music which is like Life itself and draws forth my very being, yet leaves me still a body of dust and clay?) Nay, is it Life, or is it Death — (is not earthly life but a death?) — this sovereign which, thunder-crowned,<sup>2</sup> now reaches out and takes note of my individual existence on earth, small as I am in the great tides of universal chance and change, and which knows to what final end I shall come after my terrestrial labors?<sup>3</sup> (At the same time: is this music a higher life of ecstasy or is it a death and denial of human endeavor,

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<sup>1</sup> This is clear from the subtitle and from the reading of the first line in *Poems*, 1870, when it stood among the "Sonnets for Pictures and Other Sonnets:"

"Is it the moved air or the moving sound."

<sup>2</sup> Three images in one: the sky piled with clouds, the roar of the ocean, the climax of the music.

<sup>3</sup> The figure of wave and tide is carried out: "in the ground" seems a somewhat rime-forced phrase for "along the shore," *i. e.*, on earth.

this music which reveals my very self to me and whither I am bound?)

The sestet continues more simply: What is this which seems to know my past — the road I came, the bright joys turned to darkness, the darkness again made bright, the steep places which rose now here now there? — this which even now surrounds me like a shelter and enables me to look back upon the dismal past with a renewed rapture? <sup>1</sup>

There remains the title. W. M. R. tells us that the monochord “is defined as ‘an instrument of one string, used to ascertain and demonstrate the several lengths of the string required to produce the several notes of the musical scale.’ Evidently, however, the word Monochord is not here applied in this literal sense, but may rather indicate ‘the power of music in eliciting and meting out the emotions of the human soul.’” The monochord is an acoustical instrument by which a certain pitch may be produced by placing a movable bridge at a mathematically calculated point; it is thus a sort of stringed pitch-pipe or standard measure. By using it as

<sup>1</sup> Since the reader is entitled to all the help possible, I transcribe W. M. R.’s paraphrase: “Is it this sky’s vast vault, or is it this ocean’s sound, which is Life’s self, and which draws my life from me, and which, by instinct [self-inherent] ineffable decree, holds my breath quailing on the bitter bound? Nay, is it Life, or Death, thus thunder-crowned [crowned with the thunderous raptures of music], which, amid the tide of all emergency, now notes my separate wave [appeals to my individual consciousness, “finds me out” as a single personal existence], and notes towards what sea its difficult eddies labour in the ground? Oh what is this that knows the road along which I came [evokes so many reminiscences of my past emotional life], the flame turned cloud, the cloud returned to flame [light and obscurity, happiness and unhappiness], the lifted shifted steeps, and all the way? this which draws round me at last this wind-warmed space [lulls me into meditative quietude], and turns my face, in regenerate rapture, upon the devious coverts of dismay [lifts me out of despondency, and makes me contemplate even past sorrow with a thrill of bliss]?” (*R. D. W.*, pp. 242 f.)

a title, Rossetti seems to imply that music may furnish a kind of test for answering the questions of Life and Death. But he does not quite treat it so; rather it asks more questions than it answers. Perhaps also Rossetti thought of himself, that is, the individual hearer, as the one-stringed instrument on which Life makes a various music.

## LXXX

*From Dawn to Noon*

As the child knows not if his mother's face  
Be fair; nor of his elders yet can deem  
What each most is; but as of hill or stream  
At dawn, all glimmering life surrounds his place:  
Who yet, tow'rd noon of his half-weary race,  
Pausing awhile beneath the high sun-beam  
And gazing steadily back, — as through a dream,  
In things long past new features now can trace: —  
Even so the thought that is at length fullgrown  
Turns back to note the sun-smit paths, all grey  
And marvellous once, where first it walked alone;  
And haply doubts, amid the unblenching day,  
Which most or least impelled its onward way, —  
Those unknown things or these things overknown.

Date: ?1871.

This sonnet is not, I think, difficult; but it requires a certain amount of reflection, which may best be condensed into a free paraphrase. — When a man's thought has attained its full development, the man remains dubious whether the tentative stage, when the thought still remained obscure to himself, or the

realizing stage, when the thought assumed express and definite form, was the more important factor in the result. This is like the experience of a child now grown up, who in childhood does not analyze any of his impressions as to the persons that surround him, but in adult age can recall the impressions, and can through these analyze the motive causes of them (*R. D. W.*, pp. 242-243).

The main difficulty lies in the perplexing looseness of the sentence structure, especially of the octave. The gentle reader may puzzle it out, if he will; it runs thus: "As the child knows not . . . ; nor can deem . . . ; (but . . . place:) [the child] Who yet, . . . pausing . . . (as through . . . [the child] can trace:) — Even so the thought . . . Turns back . . . And haply doubts . . ." — But one may be permitted to admire W. M. R.'s paraphrase more than the original.

## LXXXI

*Memorial Thresholds*

WHAT place so strange, — though unrevealèd snow

With unimaginable fires arise

At the earth's end, — what passion of surprise

Like frost-bound fire-girt scenes of long ago?

Lo! this is none but I this hour; and lo!

This is the very place which to mine eyes

Those mortal hours in vain immortalize,

'Mid hurrying crowds, with what alone I know.

City, of thine a single simple door,

By some new Power reduplicate, must be

Even yet my life-porch in eternity,

Even with one presence filled, as once of yore:  
 Or mocking winds whirl round a chaff-strown floor  
 Thee and thy years and these my words and me.

Date: ?1874 (*R. D. W.*).

The Poet here contemplates some house in which some event of supreme importance in his past life occurred: the most wondrous natural phenomena would be less wondrous to him than the mysterious interconnection of this house, and of his own destiny, past, present, and in all future time irreversible (*R. D. W.*, p. 243).

What place could be so strange, what scene could be so surprising, as that of a certain winter long ago? Lo, here am I — it is I myself — amid the city crowds, and this is the very house in which that event took place, and I am the only one who knows. Through the single simple door of this house (somehow duplicated in another world) must be my entrance into eternal life — or into everlasting annihilation.

Such is the general run of the sonnet. I return to details. Without W. M. R.'s note it is impossible to understand the "unrevealed snow with unimaginable fires": "I surmise that Rossetti may have been thinking of the conclusion of Edgar Poe's strange story, 'The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym': Pym is represented as approaching the Antarctic Pole, and witnessing marvellous appearances, partly in the nature of an aurora borealis" (*R. D. W.*, p. 243 n.). "Passion of surprise" has both its literal meaning and also a secondary sense of "surprise of passion." The rhetorical phrase "frost-bound fire-girt" I take to suggest a scene by a winter fireside: W. M. R. glosses: "reminiscent of anguish and passion." Of the first tercet W. M. R. gives a clear explanation: "This doorway is associated with my past life on earth: this same doorway — the events of

my life related to this doorway — must fashion my fate in eternity. See, for a cognate thought, the close of Sonnet 63, *Inclusiveness*" (*R. D. W.*, p. 244 n.). The terrible magnificence of the last line needs no comment.

It is impossible not to connect this sonnet with the *Innominata*, in view of the "in vain" and "what alone I know," of lines 7 and 8.

## LXXXII (xxxviii, 1870)

*Hoarded Joy*

I SAID: — "Nay, pluck not, — let the first fruit be:

Even as thou sayest, it is sweet and red,

But let it ripen still. The tree's bent head

Sees in the stream its own fecundity

And bides the day of fulness. Shall not we

At the sun's hour that day possess the shade,

And claim our fruit before its ripeness fade,

And eat it from the branch and praise the tree?"

I say: "Alas! our fruit hath wooed the sun

Too long, — 'tis fallen and floats adown the stream.

Lo, the last clusters! Pluck them every one,

And let us sup with summer; ere the gleam

Of autumn set the year's pent sorrow free,

And the woods wail like echoes from the sea."

Date: ?1868-70 (Tisdell).

"One may postpone fruition till the time for fruition is well-nigh past" (*R. D. W.*, p. 244). A simple parable on the *carpe diem* theme, symbol and inner meaning being equally obvious. Perhaps also a love sonnet.



## LXXXIII (xxxiv, 1870)

*Barren Spring*

ONCE more the changed year's turning wheel returns:  
 And as a girl sails balanced in the wind,  
 And now before and now again behind  
 Stoops as it swoops, with cheek that laughs and burns,—  
 So Spring comes merry towards me here, but earns  
 No answering smile from me, whose life is twin'd  
 With the dead boughs that winter still must bind,  
 And whom to-day the Spring no more concerns.

Behold, this crocus is a withering flame;  
 This snowdrop, snow; this apple-blossom's part  
 To breed the fruit that breeds the serpent's art.  
 Nay, for these Spring-flowers, turn thy face from them,  
 Nor stay till on the year's last lily-stem  
 The white cup shrivels round the golden heart.

Date: ?1869; ?1868-70 (Tisdell).

Marked in one of the MSS to come after LXX.

Spring comes, but it is not for me; mine are still the dead boughs of winter. This crocus is but a fading flame — for me, this snowdrop is but snow, the bud on the appletree will breed only the deadly fruit (of Eden). Why should I wait till the last lily fades and dies?

The simile of the first quatrain is not very happy; nor its climactic "stoops as it swoops."<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, "withering flame" is a good — and easy — ex-

<sup>1</sup> Cf. LI ("Willowwood," 3) for similar "effects."

ample of Rossetti's trick of combining two images.<sup>1</sup> The hint of suicide in the last lines is too vague to be taken seriously; but if the sonnet was composed in 1869 (a probable date), such meaning is quite likely.<sup>2</sup>

## LXXXIV

*Farewell to the Glen*

SWEET stream-fed glen, why say "farewell" to thee  
Who far'st so well and find'st for ever smooth  
The brow of Time where man may read no ruth?  
Nay, do thou rather say "farewell" to me,  
Who now fare forth in bitterer fantasy  
Than erst was mine where other shade might soothe  
By other streams, what while in fragrant youth  
The bliss of being sad made melancholy.

And yet, farewell! For better shalt thou fare  
When children bathe sweet faces in thy flow  
And happy lovers blend sweet shadows there  
In hours to come, than when an hour ago  
Thine echoes had but one man's sighs to bear  
And thy trees whispered what he feared to know.

Date: written at Penkill Castle, 27 September 1869  
(Sharp, pp. 27, 429).

Marked in one of the MSS to come after LXIX.

This sonnet is sometimes praised, but seems rather

<sup>1</sup> At least so I take it: the flame dies as a flower withers. But perhaps "withering" means only scorching.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. XLI and LXXXVII.

banal and below Rossetti's lower standard. One might say: Rossetti writing in Wordsworth's earlier manner. Those who enjoy this kind of simplicity are welcome to their pleasure; but for genuine simplicity and energy together, see LXXXVI. The sevenfold play on the word "fare," the "brow of Time," the Latinism "What while," the "fragrant youth," the "bliss of being sad," are sufficiently damning. The conclusion is somewhat better.

## LXXXV (xxxix, 1870)

*Vain Virtues*

WHAT is the sorriest thing that enters Hell?

None of the sins, — but this and that fair deed

Which a soul's sin at length could supersede.

These yet are virgins, whom death's timely knell

Might once have sainted; whom the fiends compel

Together now, in snake-bound shuddering sheaves

Of anguish, while the pit's pollution leaves

Their refuse maidenhood abominable.

Night sucks them down, the tribute of the pit,

Whose names, half entered in the book of Life,

Were God's desire at noon. And as their hair

And eyes sink last, the Torturer deigns no whit

To gaze, but, yearning, waits his destined wife,

The Sin still blithe on earth that sent them there.

Date: March 1869 (*Rossetti Papers*, p. 386).

This is a powerful expression of the horribleness of virtue forfeited, of the failure to measure up to one's

early promise, of one's own negating of one's own virtues. It was still more powerful, though not more poetic, in the 1870 version, where "scorching bridegroom" stood for "pit's pollution" (l. 7), "garbage" for "tribute" (l. 9), and "worthier" for "destined" (l. 13). Than this and LXXXVI there are, says William Sharp, "no more terrible and impressive sonnets in our language."<sup>1</sup>

The drift of this sonnet is no doubt clear enough. But it may be worth while to call attention to its double character — (1) as an ethical meditation, and (2) as an apologue, or spiritual impersonation. — (1) The ethical meditation is to the effect that the damnation or eternal condemnation of sin is not so dreadful a thing to reflect upon as the fact that a soul, sinful at last, may have been virtuous at first, and thus, when the soul is finally condemned, its virtues may be regarded as damned along with its sins. — (2) The apologue can be presented thus. A virtuous deed, the offspring of a human Soul, is a fair Virgin, who, were the Soul then to pass out of earthly life, would become a saint in heaven. But the Soul afterwards commits a mortal sin — links itself to Sin. The destiny of the Sin is that, when the Soul dies, she shall become the bride of the Devil: but, even while the Sin is "still blithe on earth," the fair Virgin, the virtuous deed, has her prospective sainthood forfeited, and is sucked down helpless into the pit of doom (*R. D. W.*, p. 246).

Touches of Blake are visible in the apologue.

<sup>1</sup> In lines 7-8 (of the 1870 version) Rossetti "pursues the metaphor to the very pit of beastliness," says Buchanan (p. 62).

## LXXXVI (XL, 1870)

*Lost Days*

THE lost days of my life until to-day,  
 What were they, could I see them on the street  
 Lie as they fell? Would they be ears of wheat  
 Sown once for food but trodden into clay?  
 Or golden coins squandered and still to pay?  
 Or drops of blood dabbling the guilty feet?  
 Or such spilt water as in dreams must cheat  
 The undying throats of Hell, athirst always?

I do not see them here; but after death  
 God knows I know the faces I shall see,  
 Each one a murdered self, with low last breath.  
 "I am thyself, — what hast thou done to me?"  
 "And I — and I — thyself," (lo! each one saith,)  
 "And thou thyself to all eternity!"

Date: ?1858 (*R. D. W.*).

"To lose one's days, to squander one's time, is like committing suicide in instalments. Every lost day is a part of oneself — a self — a murdered self" (*R. D. W.*, p. 247).

This is a piece of splendid stark simplicity. Buxton Forman (pp. 211-212) cites it as a sample of

the poet's great power in realizing natural phenomena, and throwing them into finished figure-pieces wherein thought takes substance and substance manifests itself in sound and colour — not "where music and moonlight and feeling are one," but where music and language and colour and feeling are so blended as to seem one.

The date is significant; the difference between Rossetti's earlier manner and later mannerism is apparent in his revision of the eighth line, which read (surely much better) in 1870:

The throats of men in Hell who thirst always.

Rossetti to Hall Caine in 1880:

Pardon an egotistic sentence (in answer to what you say so generously of *Lost Days*), if I express an opinion that *Known in Vain* [LXV] and *Stillborn Love* [LV] may perhaps be said to head the series in value, though *Lost Days* might be equally a favorite with me if I did not remember in what but too opportune juncture it was wrung out of me.<sup>1</sup>

### LXXXVII (XLI, 1870)

#### *Death's Songsters*

WHEN first that horse, within whose populous womb  
The birth was death, o'ershadowed Troy with fate,  
Her elders, dubious of its Grecian freight,  
Brought Helen there to sing the songs of home;  
She whispered, "Friends, I am alone; come, come!"

Then, crouched within, Ulysses waxed afraid,  
And on his comrades' quivering mouths he laid  
His hands, and held them till the voice was dumb.

The same was he who, lashed to his own mast,  
There where the sea-flowers screen the charnel-caves,  
Beside the sirens' singing island pass'd,  
Till sweetness failed along the inveterate waves . . .  
Say, soul, — are songs of Death no heaven to thee,  
Nor shames her lip the cheek of Victory?

<sup>1</sup> *Recollections*, p. 237. Cf. Rossetti's similar statement concerning LIII. Cf. also Rossetti's estimate of CI.

Date: 1868-69; ?1868-70 (Tisdell).

The application of this sonnet is not entirely clear to me. It will be observed that, except for its last two lines, the sonnet consists entirely of a reference to two acts of heroic self-discipline recorded of Ulysses. Then in the last two lines comes the application. This application, as I apprehend it, is an appeal of the Poet to his own moral conscience, and relates to the question of a noble or degrading tone in the poetry which he affects, as writer or reader. Will he, like Ulysses, disregard and disdain the blandishment of the song of the Sirens, and of the wiles of Helen? (*R. D. W.*, pp. 247-248).

I understand the sonnet rather differently. The songs of home that Helen sings (l. 4) are the songs of Death (l. 13), and when Helen whispers "Come," it was as Death whispering to the Poet. But Ulysses, the wise and strong-willed, prevents the answer. It was this same Ulysses who resisted the enticing songs of the Sirens — songs that meant spiritual death to Ulysses. . . . O my soul, are songs of death no temptation to thee? art thou not ashamed of resisting? <sup>1</sup> The whole sonnet then is an echo of Rossetti's contemplation of suicide in 1868-69. Cf. XLI and the Notes thereto.

In line 1 "that" is, of course, the Latin *ille*. "Her" (l. 3) refers to Helen. "Inveterate waves" (l. 12) are, according to W. M. R., "the waves whose clang mingled with the voice of the Sirens, and finally overpowered it"; perhaps — but "obstinate" ("resisting") is simpler and quite sufficient. Ulysses had gone by, and the waves could resist the song!

<sup>1</sup> In these last lines there is an obvious reminiscence of I Cor. xv, 55.



## LXXXVIII

*Hero's Lamp*\*

THAT lamp thou fill'st in Eros' name to-night,  
O Hero, shall the Sestian augurs take  
To-morrow, and for drowned Leander's sake  
To Anteros its fireless lip shall plight.  
Aye, waft the unspoken vow: yet dawn's first light  
On ebbing storm and life twice ebb'd must break;  
While 'neath no sunrise, by the Avernian Lake,  
Lo where Love walks, Death's pallid neophyte.  
That lamp within Anteros' shadowy shrine  
Shall stand unlit (for so the gods decree)  
Till some one man the happy issue see  
Of a life's love, and bid its flame to shine:  
Which still may rest unfir'd; for, theirs or thine,  
O brother, what brought love to them or thee?

\* After the deaths of Leander and of Hero, the signal-lamp was dedicated to Anteros, with the edict that no man should light it unless his love had proved fortunate.

Date: Perhaps ca. 1875 (Page).

When was Love ever a blessing?

This sonnet belongs to the order of poetry properly called "neat"; it is not very much like Rossetti. His own footnote explains the background. Sestos was the town on the Hellespont in which Hero lived. A pencilled note in the MS. (according to Mr. Page) refers to Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Part III, Sec. II, Mem. vi, Subs. 3. The passage occurs in Mem. v, about the middle of Subsection 3. "When Leander was

drowned," says Burton, "the inhabitants of Sestos consecrated Hero's lantern to Anteros, *Anteroti sacrum*, and he that had good success in his love should light the candle; but never any man was found to light it; which I can refer to nought, but the inconstancy and lightness of women." Apparently Rossetti took his hint for the sonnet from this; but his footnote seems to have been written from memory.

W. M. R. objects that "Augurs, as being a Latin and not a Grecian appellation, is not quite correct here" (*R. D. W.*, p. 249 n.). "Anteros" (the brother of Eros and his opposite) is properly accented in line 4; in line 9 it is necessary to adopt the Greek accent: 'Αντέρωσ. The "life twice ebb'd" (l. 6) is Hero's and Leander's. The "brother" of line 14 is apparently not W. M. R.! "Theirs or thine" (l. 13) is in apposition with "love" (l. 14).

"Rossetti intended to paint a picture of Hero with her lamp: it remained unexecuted. This sonnet may probably have been written as an adjunct to the picture" (*R. D. W.*, p. 249 n.).

## LXXXIX

### *The Trees of the Garden*

YE who have passed Death's haggard hills; and ye  
 Whom trees that knew your sires shall cease to know  
 And still stand silent: — is it all a show, —  
 A wisp that laughs upon the wall? — decree  
 Of some inexorable supremacy  
 Which ever, as man strains his blind surmise  
 From depth to ominous depth, looks past his eyes,  
 Sphinx-faced with unabashèd augury?

Nay, rather question the Earth's self. Invoke  
 The storm-felled forest-trees moss-grown to-day  
 Whose roots are hillocks where the children play;  
 Or ask the silver sapling 'neath what yoke  
 Those stars, his spray-crown's clustering gems, shall  
     wage  
 Their journey still when his boughs shrink with age.

Date: Perhaps ca. 1875 (Page).

Do the dead know? or the living? As well ask the  
 Earth.

Ye who have passed behind the haggard hills of Death, and ye whom the trees (who once knew your fathers) shall soon cease to know (and yet stand silent) — is life a show, a flicker on the wall,<sup>1</sup> a thing decreed by some inexorable, inscrutable power? Nay, question the Earth rather than mankind, dead or living. Ask the forest trees storm-felled and now no more than moss-grown hillocks; or ask the birch sapling what power will guide, when his boughs are old and withered, the stars that gleam like a cluster of gems in his crown of leaves.

It will be noticed that trees appear three times in the sonnet, but the trees of the Garden are not evident — although the silver sapling and the trees that knew your sires are probably meant; trees perhaps in the Cheyne Walk garden. On “unabashed augury” (l. 8) W. M. R. says: “A good deal of meaning seems condensed into the single epithet ‘unabashed.’ It indicates (1) that no response is vouchsafed, and (2) that the ‘sphinx-faced decree’ continues as portentously calm and inscrutable as if no question had been asked and left unanswered” (*R. D. W.*, p. 250 n.).

<sup>1</sup> W. M. R. explains: “a will-o'-the-wisp that laughs [glints and shimmers] upon the wall.” But will-o'-the-wisps are not usually found upon walls. Does Rossetti mean by “wisp” a bit of nothing, like a shadow?

XC (XLII, 1870)

*“Retro me, Sathana!”*

GET thee behind me. Even as, heavy-curved,  
    Stooping against the wind, a charioteer  
    Is snatched from out his chariot by the hair,  
So shall Time be; and as the void car, hurled  
Abroad by reinless steeds, even so the world:  
    Yea, even as chariot-dust upon the air,  
    It shall be sought and not found anywhere.  
Get thee behind me, Satan. Oft unfurled,  
Thy perilous wings can beat and break like lath  
    Much mightiness of men to win thee praise.  
    Leave these weak feet to tread in narrow ways.  
Thou still, upon the broad vine-sheltered path,  
Mayst wait the turning of the phials of wrath  
    For certain years, for certain months and days.

Date: 1847 (*L. and M.*, i, 107-108).

Time and the world shall cease; so shall Satan go his way to destruction.

This is one of the earliest-written sonnets in the sequence. Its Miltonic inspiration is obvious, but not disturbing. The simile in the first quatrain, however, is rather startling. W. M. R. paraphrases: “Even as a charioteer, with long heavy ringlets, snatched out of his chariot by the force of the blast upon his hair.” But the sestet is admirable in its restrained contempt. One recalls Meredith’s “On a starr’d night.”

## XCI (XLIII, 1870)

*Lost on Both Sides*

AS when two men have loved a woman well,  
Each hating each, through Love's and Death's deceit;  
Since not for either this stark marriage-sheet  
And the long pauses of this wedding-bell;  
Yet o'er her grave the night and day dispel  
At last their feud forlorn, with cold and heat;  
Nor other than dear friends to death may fleet  
The two lives left that most of her can tell: —  
So separate hopes, which in a soul had wooed  
The one same Peace, strove with each other long,  
And Peace before their faces perished since:  
So through that soul, in restless brotherhood,  
They roam together now, and wind among  
Its bye-streets, knocking at the dusty inns.

Date: 1854 (*Letters to Allingham*, p. 31).

Lafcadio Hearn gives the following explanation of this sonnet:

The comparison is of the hopes and aims of the artist to a couple of men in love with the same woman — bitter enemies while she lives, because of their natural rivalry, but loving each other after her death, simply because they each can understand better than anybody else the pain of the other. Afterward the men, once rivals, passed all their time together, wandering about at night in search of some quiet place, where they can sit down and drink and talk together.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Pre-Raphaelite and Other Poets*, p. 102. Hearn adds this also, which I do not altogether understand: "The artist who loves does all

W. M. R. says:

This seems to me one of the most singular of the sonnets, both in thought and in some parts of its diction — particularly the close; one of the most readily remembered, but hardly of the most satisfying. I do not know what train of thought or of feeling impelled my brother to write the sonnet, but should conjecture that it was composed at some moment of discontent with his own endeavours, whether as painter or as poet. According to this view, the “separate hopes which in a soul had wooed the one same Peace” would be his efforts, partly in the form of painting and partly in that of poetry, at obtaining eminence (by which I do not mean worldly reputation so much as adequate self-development). This hoped-for eminence is now contemplated as unattainable, or at any rate unattained; and the efforts themselves “roam together through that soul,” its obscurer bye-ways and disused halting-places (*R. D. W.*, pp. 251-252).

This is certainly nearer the truth than Hearn’s explanation. It might at first seem that the two separate hopes were the two antagonistic loves of Rossetti’s tragic experience; and this would suit the last lines well enough. But the date of the sonnet, 1854, precludes, I suppose, such an hypothesis.

W. M. R. queries whether “through” (l. 2) means “because of” (motive) or “throughout” (duration). Perhaps both meanings are to be felt. “Death’s deceit” is, of course, the deception that Death has played upon both lovers, by removing the Beloved from them. The “marriage sheet” (l. 3) is the shroud, and the “wedding bell” (l. 4) the death-knell.

his work with the thought of the woman that he loves before him; his hope to win fame is that he may make her proud of him; his aims are in all cases to please her. After he has lost her, these hopes and aims, which might have been antagonists to each other in former days, are now reconciled within him; her memory alone is now the inspiration and the theme” (p. 103).

The variants in the first version (in the letter to Allingham, 1854) are of some interest; together with Rossetti's accompanying statement: "My sonnets are not generally finished till I see them again after forgetting them, and this is only two days old." The variants are: line 2, "Each hating each; and all in all, deceit"; line 3, "straight" (= strait?) for "stark"; line 5, "But" for "Yet"; line 9, "that" for "which"; lines 12-14,

So from that soul, in mindful brotherhood,  
 (When silence may not be) sometimes they throng  
 Through high-streets and at many dusty inns.

That this last did not satisfy either Allingham or Rossetti appears from a letter written shortly after that just mentioned (cf. *Letters*, p. 45). Rossetti admitted that the lines were "certainly foggy" and continued: "Would they be better thus? —

So in that soul, — a mindful brotherhood, —  
 (When silence may not be), they wind among  
 Its bye-streets, knocking at the dusty inns.

Or I should like better —

— they fare along  
 Its high street, knocking, etc.,

but fear the rhyme 'long' and 'along' is hardly admissible."



## XCII (XLIV, 1870), XCIII

*The Sun's Shame*

## I

BEHOLDING youth and hope in mockery caught  
 From life; and mocking pulses that remain  
 When the soul's death of bodily death is fain;  
 Honour unknown, and honour known unsought;  
 And penury's sedulous self-torturing thought  
 On gold, whose master therewith buys his bane;  
 And longed-for woman longing all in vain  
 For lonely man with love's desire distraught;  
 And wealth, and strength, and power, and pleasantness,  
 Given unto bodies of whose souls men say,  
 None poor and weak, slavish and foul, as they: —  
 Beholding these things, I behold no less  
 The blushing morn and blushing eve confess  
 The shame that loads the intolerable day.

Date: ?1868-70 (Tisdell).

Beholding youth and hope snatched away in mockery; and living itself a mockery when the soul is dead; and honor unrecognized whereas the honor that *is* recognized is unsought;<sup>1</sup> and penury's devotion to money, which becomes a bane; and love desired but thwarted;<sup>2</sup> and wealth, strength, power,

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<sup>1</sup> W. M. R. takes this as a generalization: some men deserve honor without attaining it, others . . . etc. May it not refer to Rossetti's recognition as a painter while he prefers to be honored as a poet? or *vice versa*?

<sup>2</sup> These two, (comparative) poverty and thwarted love, are obviously autobiographic details.

happiness given to those who least deserve them: — beholding all these things, I see also how both morning and evening blush at the day's shame.

The real weakness of this sonnet lies (as William Sharp noted) in resembling too closely Shakespeare's 66th; its interest is largely autobiographic.

## 2

As some true chief of men, bowed down with stress  
Of life's disastrous eld, on blossoming youth  
May gaze, and murmur with self-pity and ruth, —  
“Might I thy fruitless treasure but possess,  
Such blessing of mine all coming years should bless;” —  
Then sends one sigh forth to the unknown goal,  
And bitterly feels breathe against his soul  
The hour swift-winged of nearer nothingness: —

Even so the World's grey Soul to the green World  
Perchance one hour must cry: “Woe's me, for whom  
Inveteracy of ill portends the doom, —  
Whose heart's old fire in shadow of shame is furl'd:  
While thou even as of yore art journeying,  
All soulless now, yet merry with the Spring!”

Date: ?1871.

As a great man, bowed with age, may gaze with self-pity upon a youth, thinking what he might accomplish if he were young again; and only feels death the closer at hand — even so the world, grown gray with winter, may cry to the green world of coming spring. Alas that inveterate doom condemns my fire (my glory) to the shadow, while thou, soulless now (unborn), art moving merrily onward.

A simple simile, not quite of sonnet-size, characteristically elaborated. The idea gains dignity, however, from the title and from the implication in the closing lines: The world will end with age and shame, yet Spring will follow.

## XCIV

*Michelangelo's Kiss*

GREAT Michelangelo, with age grown bleak  
 And uttermost labours, having once o'ersaid  
 All grievous memories on his long life shed,  
 This worst regret to one true heart could speak: —  
 That when, with sorrowing love and reverence meek,  
 He stooped o'er sweet Colonna's dying bed,  
 His Muse and dominant Lady, spirit-wed, —  
 Her hand he kissed, but not her brow or cheek.

O Buonarruoti, — good at Art's fire-wheels  
 To urge her chariot! — even thus the Soul,  
 Touching at length some sorely-chastened goal,  
 Earns oftenest but a little: her appeals  
 Were deep and mute, — lowly her claim'. Let be:  
 What holds for her Death's garner? And for thee?

Date: 1881 (*R. D. W.*, p. 171).

A noble, well-sustained sonnet, written in 1881 and sent to Christina (together with another called "Tiber, Nile, and Thames"<sup>1</sup>) with the sadly gay comment: "With me, sonnets mean insomnia."

<sup>1</sup> Collected Works, i, 340.

Great Michelangelo, grown bleak with age and labor, confessed, after reviewing all the sorrows of his life, that his worst regret was having kissed the hand, not the brow or cheek, of the dying Vittoria Colonna, whom he adored but had wedded only in the spirit. Even thus the soul, touching the goal at last after sore trials, oftenest earns but little. Life gives but small reward; — what then of Death?

The “one true heart” (l. 4) was “Condivi, the scholar and biographer of Michelangelo: it is from Condivi that the statement in the text comes” (*R. D. W.*, p. 253 n.). Rossetti’s play on the name Buonarruoti in “good at Art’s fire-wheels” rests upon a mistaken etymology; see *R. D. W.*, p. 254 n.

XCV (XLV, 1870)

*The Vase of Life*

AROUND the vase of Life at your slow pace

He has not crept, but turned it with his hands,

And all its sides already understands.

There, girt, one breathes alert for some great race;

Whose road runs far by sands and fruitful space;

Who laughs, yet through the jolly throng has pass’d;

Who weeps, nor stays for weeping; who at last,

A youth, stands somewhere crowned, with silent face.

And he has filled this vase with wine for blood,

With blood for tears, with spice for burning vow,

With watered flowers for buried love most fit;

And would have cast it shattered to the flood,

Yet in Fate’s name has kept it whole; which now

Stands empty till his ashes fall in it.

Date: ?1868-69 (Tisdell).

This sonnet (which is a comparatively early performance) is made up entirely of imagery, and requires a little scrutiny preparatory to our reading it off. — 1, Human Life is figured as a vase sculptured with a bas-relief: the bas-relief represents a youth running a race, which he wins, and stands crowned. 2, A certain person, whom we may regard as a man rich in faculty and bold in enterprise — a man of genius — does not, like other less finely-endowed men, creep around this vase; but turns it from side to side, and masters its imaged significance. 3, He fills it with the rapid and ardent experiences of his career, and it is finally to receive his own ashes. — These are the principal contents of the sonnet; but some details, perhaps rather obscurely expressed, will remain to be considered as we proceed. — I never knew whether my brother was thinking of some particular “man of genius” when he wrote this sonnet: but have always suspected that he had in his eye his own early colleague in the race of art and life, the illustrious painter whom we now know by the name of Sir John Millais *R. D. W.*, pp. 254-255).

The sonnet is an extremely interesting product of the expansive imagination; there is a splendid vagueness about it, even after repeated readings; so that it has something of the effect of music. It seems full of transparent meaning, until one stops to ask precisely what that meaning is.

W. M. R.'s “a comparatively early performance” is rather a dark oracle. The sonnet was first printed in 1869, in the *Fortnightly Review*, under the title “Run and Won,” and may well have been written shortly before; though I should suppose “comparatively early” to signify at least the eighteen-fifties, which would be too early, however, to account for the allusion to Millais. My own feeling is that Rossetti is describing himself, though I can do little to justify the conjecture. He feels that he has *lived* — and expresses this fact under vari-

ous tropes — and would now have gladly ended his life but for Fate's decree. And this is reasonably close to the biographic facts and very much in tone with several of his utterances.

He has not crept around the Vase of Life, like your ordinary mortals, but he has turned it in his hands and understood its meaning. On this Vase there is a picture (perhaps sculptured, as W. M. R. has it, perhaps painted) representing various scenes of a race: first, the runner alert and ready for the start — ahead of him lies the road through sandy and fertile country; then he has passed through the jolly throng of onlookers;<sup>1</sup> at last he stands crowned victor, yet with silent face. — We return now to the man who holds the Vase of Life in his hands. He has filled the vase with wine (that is, with his life-blood), with blood (that is, with his tears), with spices (that is, as for a burnt-offering), and with flowers most suitable for a buried love.<sup>2</sup> He would in truth have liked to break it and cast it away, yet has kept it whole in Fate's name. And now it stands empty waiting for his ashes.

<sup>1</sup> I omit "Who weeps, nor stays for weeping" (l. 7); it appears to belong rather to the parallel image of "life" than to the actual picture of the runner. To be sure, one can work it in, but not without violence.

<sup>2</sup> W. M. R. admits his perplexity over the first three lines of the sestet. "The use of the word 'for' in these lines is not quite clear to me. In the first line 'for' appears to mean 'instead of,' and so perhaps in the earlier instance in the second line: wine instead of blood, and blood instead of tears. The next 'for' appears to mean 'on account of,' or 'by way of': spice by way of burnt offering. In the last line 'for' has its natural primary sense, following the adjective 'fit.' Madame Couve translates thus: 'De sa coupe déborde plus de vin que de sang; puis plus de sang que de larmes.' If the reader thinks that, even after these explanations, the total drift of the passage is not plain, I do not dissent from him" (*R. D. W.*, p. 255 n.). The words here are all "big" words, and perhaps it is a mistake to press their literal meaning too hard.

The precise relation of the picture on the vase to the rest of the sonnet is still somewhat puzzling. The picture represents the conventional "race of life." Here is one who has run a good race and won the crown; who has made the most of life, yet has not been turned aside by its sorrows or overcome by his own victory. I take it (without too much confidence) that we have this picture of true success contrasted with the other, of a life disturbed with blood, tears, burning vows, and buried love — and in the end empty and worthless. On the one hand an ideal life, and on the other a wasted life — and this (says the poet) is what comes of handling the vase of life too eagerly.

## XCVI

*Life the Beloved*

As thy friend's face, with shadow of soul o'erspread,  
Somewhile unto thy sight perchance hath been  
Ghastly and strange, yet never so is seen  
In thought, but to all fortunate favour wed;  
As thy love's death-bound features never dead  
To memory's glass return, but contravene  
Frail fugitive days, and alway keep, I ween,  
Than all new life a livelier lovelier head: —

So Life herself, thy spirit's friend and love,  
Even still as Spring's authentic harbinger  
Glow with fresh hours for hope to glorify;  
Though pale she lay when in the winter grove  
Her funeral flowers were snow-flakes shed on her  
And the red wings of frost-fire rent the sky.



Date: ?1871.

This is a pleasant interlude of cheer and hopefulness, though the details are sombre enough. I transcribe W. M. R.'s paraphrase:

As the face of a friend of thine, when overspread with shadow of soul (deep gloom and melancholy), may perchance, at some time or other, have been ghastly and strange to thy sight, and yet his face, when thou art thinking of it, is never seen under this aspect, but wedded to all fortunate fervour (with a cheerful and serene semblance); or as the features of thy love, now death-bound, do not ever return to memory's glass under the aspect of death, but they contravene frail fugitive days, and always preserve \* a loveliness more living than all later life: — so does Life herself, thy spirit's friend and love, still glow, as Spring's authentic harbinger, with fresh flowers for hope to glorify; though she lay pale when in the wintry grove her funeral-flowers were but snow-flakes shed on her, and the red wings of frost-glow rent the sky (*R. D. W.*, p. 256).

As to the closing lines, Rossetti's wife was buried in the Highgate cemetery February 17, 1862.

### XCVII (XLVI, 1870)

#### *A Superscription*

LOOK in my face; my name is Might-have-been;  
 I am also called No-more, Too-late, Farewell;  
 Unto thine ear I hold the dead-sea shell  
 Cast up thy Life's foam-fretted feet between;

\* I miss out the phrase "I ween." It is a mere sorry make-rhyme here, and so it always is whenever it occurs at the end of a rhyming line. My brother certainly did not succumb to it often; perhaps not in any passage other than this. [W. M. R.]

Unto thine eyes the glass where that is seen  
Which had Life's form and Love's, but by my spell  
Is now a shaken shadow intolerable,  
Of ultimate things unuttered the frail screen.

Mark me, how still I am! But should there dart  
One moment through thy soul the soft surprise  
Of that winged Peace which lulls the breath of sighs,—  
Then shalt thou see me smile, and turn apart  
Thy visage to mine ambush at thy heart  
Sleepless with cold commemorative eyes.

Date: January, 1869 (*Rossetti Papers*, p. 380).

The subject of this sonnet is "the Sense of Loss." Chiefly, the sense of loss in the death of one supremely beloved is referred to; but we should not wholly exclude from the purview the sense of loss in any lost opportunity, any duty irrecoverably neglected, and the like (compare Sonnet 86, *Lost Days*). In the present sonnet the Sense of Loss is spoken of as remaining comparatively dull and passive, under the ordinary conditions of life; but as reasserting itself with direful force at moments when the soul feels beguiled into happiness or contentment. Then comes the reaction — the feeling of what "might have been" — the ache of unforgiving memory (*R. D. W.*, p. 257).

What is meant by the Sense of Loss? Is it an equivalent of the title? Does "Superscription" imply something like a palimpsest — an appearance of peace written over the old text of failure and despair?

The "any duty irrecoverably neglected" is one of the many pregnant phrases scattered along the whole course of William Michael Rossetti's fraternal biographical notes and commentaries. It is adequately glossed by Sir Hall Caine's account of Rossetti's terrible night

on the return from Cumberland in October 1881: "And, above all, it was my impression that Rossetti had never ceased to reproach himself with his wife's death as an event that had been due in some degree to failure of duty on his part, or perhaps to something still graver."<sup>1</sup>

This last — phrased in W. M. R.'s best manner — suggests a great deal; and there is, as every one knows, a great deal that probably never will be, never ought to be, told. Whether Rossetti will really suffer more from his biographers' reticence than from a candid analysis may be left a question. It is enough to note that early twentieth-century frankness is as much an extreme as Victorian delicacy.<sup>2</sup>

At the opening of the sonnet the compound names are dangerously familiar, and a little too suggestive of *Piers Plowman*. The compressed imagery of lines 3 and 4 is fully elucidated by W. M. R.:

This image is worded with great condensation, and may bear some expanding. The person addressed — whom we may identify with the poet himself — is figured (or in strictness his "life" is figured) as standing on the margin of the Sea of Death, here, by a rapid verbal analogy, fused into the

<sup>1</sup> Hall Caine, *My Story*, New York, 1909, p. 195.

<sup>2</sup> Part of the story, enough, perhaps, is to be found in Sir Hall Caine's plain though indirect revelation: "If I had now to reconstruct his life afresh . . . it would be the figure of a man who, after engaging himself to one woman in all honour and good faith, had fallen in love with another, and then gone on to marry the first out of a mistaken sense of loyalty and a fear of giving pain, instead of stopping, as he must have done if his will had been stronger, and his heart sterner, at the door of the church itself. It would be the figure of a man who, coming home late at night to find his wife dying, probably by her own hand, was overwhelmed with remorse, not perhaps for any unkindness, any want of attention, still less any act of infidelity on his part, but for the far deeper wrong of failure of affection for the one being to whom affection was most due" (*My Story*, pp. 196, 197).

"Dead Sea." His feet are fretted with the foam from the Sea of Death. A shell, cast up from this sea, is held to his ear by the embodied "No-more," and it drones out to him the murmurous dirge of one already sunk in the Sea of Death — the one loved and lost (*R. D. W.*, p. 257 n.).

The second quatrain continues —

Unto thine eyes I (thy dead and wasted life) hold the mirror which reveals the life and love that once were thine, but are now through thine own fault an intolerable shadow, shaken and broken, a mere screen between life and ultimate death and punishment.

The sestet is remarkably dramatic and powerful —

If thou art lulled, even for a moment, into the longed-for peace, I smile and uncover for thee the sleepless remorse in thy heart.

The restrained intensity of this sonnet, especially the latter half, makes it more terrible and impressive, I think, than LXXXV ("Vain Virtues").

### XCVIII (XLVII, 1870)

#### *He and I*

WHENCE came his feet into my field, and why?

How is it that he sees it all so drear?

How do I see his seeing, and how hear

The name his bitter silence knows it by?

This was the little fold of separate sky

Whose pasturing clouds in the soul's atmosphere

Drew living light from one continual year:

How should he find it lifeless? He, or I?

Lo! this new Self now wanders round my field,  
 With plaints for every flower, and for each tree  
 A moan, the sighing wind's auxiliary:  
 And o'er sweet waters of my life, that yield  
 Unto his lips no draught but tears unseal'd,  
 Even in my place he weeps. Even I, not he.

Date: ?1868-70 (Tisdell).

"This sonnet exhibits the dismal surprise with which a man finds that he is no longer himself, but yet is himself. He used to be youthful and buoyant: how is it that he is now ageing and dejected?" (*R. D. W.*, p. 258).

"He" is the second personality who has entered into "my" life. Whence did he come? and why? "How do I see some object — any and every object — under the same aspect in which he sees it? and how do I hear it named or designated accordingly, although he, in his bitter silence, leaves it unnamed?" (*R. D. W.*, p. 258 n.) That is, how were we blended into one? I had my own individuality, my own soul, my own existence. When we merged, was it he or I that lost separate existence? He occupies my field now, sighs over my flowers and my trees, and over the well-spring of my life that yields only tears for him. . . . Ah no; not he, but I.

XCIX, C (XLVIII, XLIX, 1870)

### *Newborn Death*

#### I

TO-DAY Death seems to me an infant child  
 Which her worn mother Life upon my knee  
 Has set to grow my friend and play with me;  
 If haply so my heart might be beguil'd

To find no terrors in a face so mild, —  
If haply so my weary heart might be  
Unto the newborn milky eyes of thee,  
O Death, before resentment reconcil'd.

How long, O Death? And shall thy feet depart  
Still a young child's with mine, or wilt thou stand  
Fullgrown the helpful daughter of my heart,  
What time with thee indeed I reach the strand  
Of the pale wave which knows thee what thou art,  
And drink it in the hollow of thy hand?

Date: 1868-69 (one of the two [XCIX, C] in December, 1868; *L. and M.*, i, 250, *Rossetti Papers*, p. 339).

The two sonnets called *New Born Death* have that flawless beauty which must outstand the stress of time, the perfect workmanship with the clear poetic vision of a truly great imaginative mind. The essential spirit of the ideal personalities mentioned is divined and embodied afresh with new loveliness, and we behold Death as a young child, Life its mother as a beautiful woman and the mother of Love that has passed away; of Song, whose hair "blew like a flame and blossomed like a wreath," and of Art, "whose eyes were worlds by God found fair," and of these the poet asks Life —

"And did these die that thou might'st bear me Death?"<sup>1</sup>

W. M. R. explains the first sonnet:

This is the utterance of a man who feels himself growing old, or for some other reason nearing the close of his career. My brother was not in fact old when he wrote the verses, the date of which is not later than 1869, when his age was forty-one. Death is figured as the child of Life. The child is as yet an infant — it is only *incipient* Death: Life sets it to dally

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<sup>1</sup> William Sharp, p. 430.

with the man, so that the two may familiarize themselves one with the other before they depart together from this world. When the moment for departure comes, will Death be still a mere child, or will she be full-grown, and welcome to the man like a helpful daughter? In other words — is he to die soon, or only after a long interval of decadence, by the end of which he shall wish for death? (*R. D. W.*, pp. 258-259).

Lines 6-8: If my weary heart might be reconciled to thee, O Death, when thou art still a newborn infant, before I should resent or regret — that is, if I might rejoice to die at once.

## 2

AND thou, O Life, the lady of all bliss,  
With whom, when our first heart beat full and fast,  
I wandered till the haunts of men were pass'd,  
And in fair places found all bowers amiss  
Till only woods and waves might hear our kiss,  
While to the winds all thought of Death we cast: —  
Ah, Life! and must I have from thee at last  
No smile to greet me and no babe but this?

Lo! Love, the child once ours; and Song, whose hair  
Blew like a flame and blossomed like a wreath;  
And Art, whose eyes were worlds by God found fair:  
These o'er the book of Nature mixed their breath  
With neck-twined arms, as oft we watched them there;  
And did these die that thou mightst bear me Death?

Date: 1868-69; see XCIX.

In the preceding sonnet we found Death spoken of as the child of Life — an image which requires no laboured explanation; as Life obviously brings forth, or results in, Death. In



the present sonnet the same image receives further development. Life and the speaker had of yore been the parents of Love, and Song, and Art: or (literally expressed) the speaker had in his prime been lover, poet, and painter. As his existence dwindles and decays, so those three children have dwindled and decayed. His Love and Song and Art are now contemplated as dead: and the only offspring which remains from his union with Life is this "newborn Death" (*R. D. W.*, pp. 259-260).

"I wandered till the haunts of men were pass'd" — this and the following lines would refer primarily to Rossetti's habitual seclusion, which became marked after his wife's death, though not a fetish until after the *Fleshly School of Poetry* episode and after he became seriously addicted to chloral. W. M. R. goes even further.

"Our kiss" [l. 5] is certainly — according to the scheme of the imagery and of the diction — the kiss of the speaker and of (his allegorical bride) Life. But here — as in so many other cases in poetry — it is fair to understand a something implied, as well as a something defined: and one perceives the poet to be thinking more of some actual experience in love than of his symbolic union with Life (*R. D. W.*, p. 260 n.).<sup>1</sup>

In other words, we have another allusion to the *Innominata* love. "Neck-twined arms" (l. 13) will scarcely please all tastes.

<sup>1</sup> This is a significant statement coming from the poet's brother; for it gives some sort of official sanction to the biographic interpretation of the sonnets — a sanction not, to be sure, needed, but nevertheless welcome.

CI (L, 1870)

*The One Hope*

WHEN vain desire at last and vain regret  
Go hand in hand to death, and all is vain,  
What shall assuage the unforgotten pain  
And teach the forgetful to forget?  
Shall Peace be still a sunk stream long unmet, —  
Or may the soul at once in a green plain  
Stoop through the spray of some sweet life-fountain  
And cull the dew-drenched flowering amulet?  
Ah! when the wan soul in that golden air  
Between the scripted petals softly blown  
Peers breathless for the gift of grace unknown, —  
Ah! let none other alien spell soe'er  
But only the one Hope's one name be there, —  
Not less nor more, but even that word alone.

Date: ?1869 (*R. D. W.*); 1870 (Page).

With this "the Sequence comes to a close, not in passionate clinging to life or love, not in high resolve or winged aspiration, or, on the other hand, not in absolute despair, but with a sad and resigned Hope" (William Sharp, p. 431).

"And then, all at once, like a sad music gathering itself up, and dying on one sweet, solemn, and joyful chord, the *One Hope* steals upon the heart" (Benson, p. 134).

This final sonnet seems to me clear. Still, the imagery is a little complex, and may bear some words of exposition. The poet first asks himself the question: "When I die, the puppet to the last of desire and regret, how will my soul stand in rela-

tion to these feelings?" He looks forward to final peace of soul — not annihilation; \* but he queries whether this peace will be attained soon, or after long delay. Then comes (occupying the residue of the sonnet) the image under which he figures the possibility of an early attainment of peace. He imagines the Soul, in its new condition, stooping "through the spray of some sweet life-fountain," and culling a flower inscribed (as the Greek fancy assumed the hyacinth to be inscribed) with some lettering, indicating what is to be the boon accorded to the Soul as its portion in eternity. What he longs to find inscribed upon the flower is "the one Hope's one name" — that is, the name of the woman supremely beloved upon earth (*R. D. W.*, pp. 260-261).

In line 5 there is possibly a hint of Purgatorial delay, as in the next line there is a hint of the immediate reward of Paradise, where flows the fountain of life.<sup>1</sup> The "sculptured petals" (l. 10) are again the "amulet" of line 8.

\* Other sonnets which bear upon this point are Nos. 37, The Love-Moon; 43, Love and Hope; 44, Cloud and Wind; 50, Willow-wood; 55, Stillborn Love; 63, Inclusiveness; 66, The Heart of the Night; 81, Memorial Thresholds; 85, Vain Virtues; 86, Lost Days; and 99, Newborn Death. In Nos. 37, 50, 55, and 66, an expectation of immortality is sufficiently indicated; so also (though here the phrases might be more open to be regarded as poetical or conventional terms) in 63, 85, and 86. No. 99 does not afford any clear intimation. Nos. 43, 44, and 81, express uncertainty — a mind in suspense.

[Cf. also W. M. R.'s statement in *L. and M.*, i, 380-381: "As to my brother's reported assertion 'I believe in a future life,' this was partially true at all periods of his career, and entirely true in his closing years. . . . In November, 1879, I found that his mind was much occupied with spiritualism, and that he was then fully convinced, or re-convinced, of immortality; and I am sure that from this belief he never afterwards receded. I cannot say with any accuracy what he supposed immortality to consist of."]

<sup>1</sup> Rossetti never accepted Roman Catholicism, or any formal creed. But in the Cheyne Walk house he displayed a crucifix prominently, and in the last illness spoke once (apparently not very seriously) of calling a priest. The imagery of the sonnet is quasi-conventional and need imply no Roman leanings anywhere.

Rossetti said to Hall Caine of this sonnet: "It is fully equal to the very best of my sonnets, or I should not have wound up the series with it."<sup>1</sup> It is perhaps disappointing to some — a testimony, at any rate, to Rossetti's natural paganism and a final emphasis on the fact that "The House of Life" is the House of Love — that he asks in Paradise only to meet his Beloved. So, at least, if one follows W. M. R.'s interpretation of "the one Hope's one name."

In 1870 "alien spell" (l. 10) read "written spell"; the emphasis of the later reading is apparent. The whole sonnet seems to say: "When, at death, all becomes vain, both desire [the thwarted love?] and regret [for a life partly wasted, for one love injured and another unenjoyed], will it be possible to forget? Will Peace come slowly or at once? This is my only prayer: to find Love." It comes to much the same thing, but I take the "one Hope's one name" to be not "the name of the woman supremely beloved upon earth," but Love itself. This accords with the first sonnet, which places Love far above terrestrial Truth, Hope, Fame, Youth, and Life; and thus at the end, after the passionate winds of earth have fallen, he would seek in the still, golden air of Paradise the ultimate mystical Love. But the vagueness of the phrasing is part of its beauty; and, finally, it is characteristic that the sequence should close with that uncertainty of what is human and what divine —

Thy soul I know not from thy body, nor  
Thee from myself, neither our love from God, —

an uncertainty both in Rossetti's mind and in ours, which marked both his life and his best poetry.

<sup>1</sup> Hall Caine, *Recollections*, p. 249.



## APPENDICES





## APPENDIX I

### ON THE DATING OF THE SONNETS

From the artistic point of view as well as the biographic some importance attaches to the comparative dates of composition of the sonnets. In the Notes I have assigned definite or conjectural dates, where they can be established by external evidence or reasonable deduction. A general view of the results will be presented here.

Of the whole series of 103 sonnets, 54 can be dated by external evidence, not all of it, however, of the same value. W. M. R.'s dates on pp. 291 ff. of *R. D. W.*, for example, are sometimes not reliable. Professor Tisdell's dates are based upon computations and deductions similar to mine in certain respects. In a few instances I have followed Mr. Page's dates without possessing his evidence.

1847	no. xc.
1848	nos. LXXI-LXXIII
1848-49	nos. LXXIV-LXXVI
1850	no. LXIX
1853	nos. LXV, LXX
1854	nos. xv, LXVII, xci
1855	no. LXVIII
?1858	no. LXXXVI
1860	no. LXIII
1868	nos. XLIX-LII
?1868	nos. via, XXXVII
ca. 1868	no. x
1864-68	nos. LXXVII, LXXVIII
1868-69	nos. LXXXVII, xcix, c

1869	nos. XLVI, XLVIII, LXXXIV, LXXXV, XCVII
?1869	nos. XLVII, LV
Also by 1869	nos. II, III, IV, VI, VIII, XXV, XXXVIII, XXXIX, XLV, XCII, XCV
1870	no. CI
Probably 1870	no. XIV
Also by 1870	nos. VII, IX, XI, XVI, XXI, XXIII, XXXVI, LXXIX, LXXXII, LXXXIII, XCVIII
1871	nos. XII, XXII, XXXIV, XL, XLI
?1871	nos. XLIII, XLIV
Also in 1871	"some thirty"
?1874	nos. LXVI, LXXXI
Perhaps 1875	nos. LXXXVIII, LXXXIX
1879	no. LXIV
1880	nos. XXIV, LXI, and the introductory sonnet
1881	nos. LVI-LVIII, XCIV

In the above list "Also by 1869" represents those sonnets not already dated but appearing in the printed but unpublished Poems of 1869 (described in W. M. R.'s *Bibliography*, pp. 16 f.). In a prefatory note to this collection Rossetti said: "Most of these poems were written between 1847 and 1853 . . . The 'Sonnets and Songs' [*i. e.*, for "The House of Life"] are chiefly more recent work." Similarly, in the above list, "Also by 1870" represents those sonnets not already dated but appearing in the *Poems*, London, 1870.

From this table it will be seen that

37 sonnets were composed *before* 1871; plus  
 11 undated which were printed in 1869; plus  
 11 undated which were printed in 1870

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59

That is, 59 of the 103 sonnets were composed *before* 1871; leaving 44 which were composed *after* 1870. Of

these 44, 12 have been dated by evidence (?1874-1881); and there remain then 32 to be accounted for. And these 32 would correspond pretty closely with W. M. R.'s statement (*L. and M.*, i, 293) that in the summer of 1871 Rossetti wrote "some thirty fresh sonnets for 'The House of Life.'" Moreover, 7 have already been dated as of 1871 or ?1871. The other 25 I have accordingly set down as ?1871.<sup>1</sup> It is worth observing, further, that (including two dated 1864-68) 75 of the 103 sonnets were thus composed in the four years 1868-71.

Of the 23 sonnets in the 1870 volume, but not printed in 1869, many might be supposed to be from the exhumed manuscript and therefore written earlier than 1862.<sup>2</sup> But 11 of these 23 are already dated, and seven of them with fair security after 1862 (nos. VIa, LV, LXXVII, LXXVIII, LXXXIV, CI; and also no. LXIX, which is dated 1850 by Mr. Page but 1869 by both W. M. R. and Sharp); that is, only four (nos. LXXI-LXXIV) of these 11 (or 23) are dated as before 1862 (all four in 1848-49). This leaves 12 undated sonnets which were printed in 1870 but not printed in 1869 (nos. VII, IX, XI, XVI, XXI, XXIII, XXXVI, LXXIX, LXXXII, LXXXIII, LXXXVII, XCVIII) and two of these, perhaps three, are from internal evidence quite likely to have been written after 1862 (nos. VII, XXXVI, LXXXVII, see Notes *ante*); the remain-

<sup>1</sup> These are nos. I, v, XIII, XVII, XVIII, XIX, XX, XXVI, XXVII, XXVIII, XXIX, XXX, XXXI, XXXII, XXXIII, XXXV, XLII, LIII, LIV, LIX, LX, LXII, LXXX, XCIII, xcvi. Cf. also Tisdell, *op. cit.*, pp. 268-269 (LXXVI, LXXXVII). Mr. Page puts seven of these "probably before 1871," viz., nos. I, XIII, XXX, XXXI, XXXV, XLII, LIV.

<sup>2</sup> W. M. R. in his *Bibliography*, p. 18, implies that there were no sonnets in the 1870 volume taken from the exhumed manuscript.

ing nine or ten may well date before 1862,<sup>1</sup> but such reckoning is hardly "evidence."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Of these nos. xi, xvi, xxi, were partly on other grounds, put by Tisdell before 1862; cf. *op. cit.*, p. 267, where nos. ii, iii, iv, vi, via, vii, viii, x, xi, xvi, xxi are conjectured to antedate 1862, "being either very sensuous or conventionally Dantesque, or both."

<sup>2</sup> The 16 sonnets published in the *Fortnightly* in 1869 are listed above, p. 44, n. 2. The 31 sonnets (including these 16) which were in the printed but unpublished collection of 1869 are nos. ii, iii, iv, vi, viii, xv, \* xxv, xxxvii, \* xxxviii, xxxix, xlv, xlvi, xlvii, \* xlviii, \* xlix, \* l, \* li, \* lii, \* lxiii, \* lxv, \* lxvii, \* lxviii, \* lxxxv, \* lxxxvi, \* xc, \* xci, \* xcii, xcv, xcvii, \* xcix, \* c.\* Those already dated are indicated by asterisks.

## APPENDIX II

### PROSODY

#### I. SONNET STRUCTURE

Including "Nuptial Sleep" (VIa) there are in all 103 sonnets in the sequence. Two of these are unusual in structure — LI and LXXXII; I shall return to them in a moment. The rest follow the Petrarchan or Italian model with the conventional variations. II and VIa are entirely regular; and VIII, X, XXXIII, XXXIV, and LXVIII are almost so. The majority rime *abba abba* in the octave, but twenty-two (or more than one fifth) add a third rime: *abba acca*.<sup>1</sup> Five (LXV, LXXII, LXXVI, XC, XCII) omit the normal pause at the end of the eighth line, and were printed by Rossetti without the usual space which indicates this pause. As always with the Italian sonnet, there is considerable variation in the sestet. Rossetti's favorite rime scheme seems to have been *cdd cdd*, for it occurs in forty (or nearly two fifths) of the series. The artistic merit of this scheme is that it carries over into the sestet the same order of rime that appears in the octave; and this order may be arranged in either of two ways (*cddc*, taking the first four together; or *dccd*, taking the last four together), or otherwise varied. Next in order of frequency is the scheme *cddc ee*, which carries over the octave arrangement, but adds a couplet. There are fourteen examples

<sup>1</sup> XIV, XV, XVIII, XIX, XXVI, XXIX, XXXIII, XL, XLI, XLVII, XLVIII, LXI, LXII, LXIV, LXVI, LXVII, LXX, LXXXV, LXXXVII, LXXXIX, XCIII, XCV. In its first draft LXVII rimed *abba abba*.

of this.<sup>1</sup> And, including the unusual LI and LXXXII, there are seven further examples of the couplet ending, making 21 (or about one fifth) in all. The other five (excluding LI and LXXXII) are the introductory sonnet, XXXIII, XXXVI, XXXVII, LXXXVII, which rime *cdcd ee*. Similarly the octave scheme is preserved in the sestet of nine others riming *cd cddc*,<sup>2</sup> in six riming *cc deed*,<sup>3</sup> in four riming *c deed c*,<sup>4</sup> and in three riming *cddc dc*.<sup>5</sup> The remaining sestets rime as follows: eleven *cde cde*;<sup>6</sup> nine *cd cd cd*.<sup>7</sup> A table will show these data more clearly:

<i>cddccd</i>	40 examples
<i>cddcee</i>	14 examples
<i>cdecde</i>	11 examples
<i>cdcddc</i>	9 examples
<i>cdcdcd</i>	9 examples
<i>cdcdee</i>	7 examples <sup>8</sup>
<i>cddeed</i>	6 examples
<i>cdeedc</i>	4 examples
<i>cddcdc</i>	3 examples.

The peculiarities of LI have been noticed above (p. 141). The scheme is *abababab acacdd*, making four rimes in all instead of the usual five because the *a* rimes (some of them trisyllabic) of the octave are carried over into the sestet.

LXXXII may be taken as *abba abba cdcd aa* if one regard the consonance red: head: shade: fade: as imper-

<sup>1</sup> XXV, XXVI, XXVIII, XXXI, XXXIII, XXXV, XLIII, XLVIII, LVIII, LIX, LXI, LXXXIX, XCIII, XCIV.

<sup>2</sup> I, V, XXIX, LVI, LX, LXVII, LXX, LXXVIII, LXXXV.

<sup>3</sup> IV, XIX, XLIX, LII, LV, LXXIX.

<sup>4</sup> LXXI, LXXII, LXXIV, LXXVII.

<sup>5</sup> XVI, LXIII, LXV.

<sup>6</sup> II, X, XXXII, XLII, LXVI, LXXV, LXXXVI, LXXX, XCI, XCV, XCVI.

<sup>7</sup> VIA, XLVII, LXVIII, LXIX, LXXIII, LXXXIV, LXXXVI, XCIX, C.

<sup>8</sup> Including LI and LXXXII.

fect rime; or as *abba acca dede aa*, if one reject the consonance; — a matter of taste. As in LI the *a* rime of the octave is carried over into the sestet.

In XXVI also the rimes are carried over, so that the whole sonnet rimes *abba acca deed aa*.

In two sonnets (LXVII, LXXV) Rossetti uses the same word to rime with itself.<sup>1</sup> In XXVI a word is repeated, from the octave, in the sestet rimes.

## II. RIMES

Rossetti's use of the weak ending in rime (be : eternity) is not nearly so excessive as is frequently supposed. Rejecting such examples as *solemnize*, *counterpart*, and *undersong* (where the secondary prose accent is well marked), but including such rimes as *monument*: *portent*, I find between 140 and 150 in the whole 1442 rimes of the 103 sonnets; that is to say, about one tenth of all the rimes are of this sort. It is often difficult to draw a distinct line between secondary accent and no accent; but between 25 and 30 sonnets (or more than one fourth) have no weak-ending rimes at all.

A different matter is Rossetti's characteristic wrenching of accent for metrical stress both in dissyllabic words and compounds and in polysyllabic words. Of the former kind the following examples are notable: *always*, *firewheels*, *likewise*, *doomsday*, *byeway*, *dryshod*, *downfall*, *noon-height*, *brim-high*, *footfall*, *sunrise*. Of the latter sort, still more characteristically Rossettian are such as *inveteracy* : *me* (XLIV), *sanctuary* (XXXI, LVIII), *absolutely* (XXXII), *melancholy* (LXXXIV), *auxiliary* (XCVIII). Quite extreme are *suitservice*

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Letters to Allingham*, p. 45, where Rossetti speaks of this matter.



(XIV), *sunsetting* (LXIV), *wayfaring* (XXI), *corn-poppy* (XXIV), *feathers* (XLIX), *householder* (LXXVI), *fountain* (CI). And many others not only force the accent but the sound as well:

farewell : foretell : desirable (I)  
 well : audible : tell : fell (XLIX)  
 acceptable : fell : Philomel : swell (LVI)  
 well : pell-mell : well : citadel (LXVII)  
 hell : knell : compel : abominable (LXXXV)  
 farewell : shell : spell : intolerable (xcvii)

harp-player : here : dear : clear (ix)

these : pleas : silences (xiii)  
 silences : trees : ease : seas (xl)  
 is : bliss : contraries : his (lvii)  
 fastnesses : these : appease : images (lxii)  
 sun-glimpses : trees : ease (xxx)  
 excellencies : is (xxxv)

there : worshipper : 'ware : hair (lxx)  
 charioteer : hair : air : anywhere (xc)

call : musical : footfall : wall (xviii)  
 all : thrall : recall : memorial : all (xxxvi)  
 downfall : recall : memorial : all (xxi)  
 intervals : falls (lxx)

place : grace : populace : space (xvi)  
 space : grace : face : loveliness (xx)

store : paramour : core (xxx)

alone : halcyon : tone : mown (xxvii)

Eve : deceive : contemplative : weave (lxxviii)

flight : light : infinite (lxiv)

simplicity : sky : imply : thereby (xxxix)  
 equality : I (xxxii)

years : tears : remembrancers (xxxvii)

Willowwood : widowhood : wooed : pillow could (li)  
 wood : brotherhood (xci)

untrod : dryshod : period : God (v)

glance : enhance : advance : countenance (lx)

Besides these imperfect rimes, some of which are more or less innocent and conventional, other examples occur both of assonance and consonance. In the following list I make no indication of those approximations which are natural and almost inevitable in English and those which are too forced for ordinary tastes. The distinctions, when not obvious, will be matters of dispute. Examples of assonance are:

malisons : once : suns (xxxviii)

smooth : ruth : soothe : youth (lxxxiv)

youth : forsooth : smooth : Ruth (xxxix)

smooth : soothe : youth (lxviii)

those : close [adj.] (lxxi)

this : his (lxxvi)

place : days (lxxvi)

since : inns (xci)

Examples of consonance are:

neck : ache : sake (vii)

then : drain : pain (xliv)

were : there : prayer (xlvii) <sup>1</sup>

death : breath : beneath : wreath (lxxvii)

wreath : breath : death (c)

flame : them : stem (lxxxiii)

? red : head : shade : fade (lxxxii)

stand : hand : wand : spann'd (liv)

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Sir : were (lxxvi); both pronunciations being of course common.

sphere : there (xxvi)  
 air : soe'er : there (cl)  
 give : live : receive : fugitive (xxiv)  
 Evangelist : mist : wist : priest (lxxiv)  
 one : known : alone : own (iv)  
 none : own (lxi)  
 thereon : shone (xxiii)  
 flown : alone : gone (lxiv)  
 bore : store : core : for (xxiii)  
 home : roam : therefrom (xlv)  
 home : come (lv)  
 shore : o'er : for : more (lxxiii)  
 along : song : tongue : wrong (xxv)  
 song : tongue (xlvii)  
 song : long : throng : tongue (l)  
 long : among (xci)  
 soft : scoff'd : laugh'd : oft (lxv)  
 noon : tune : moon (xxii)  
 interlude : wooed (vi)  
 you : who : rue : adieu (xlv)  
 retinue : hue : to : new (xlviii)  
 dew : renew : do (lxix)  
 womb : home : come : dumb (lxxxvii)  
 mound : drown'd : beyond (lxxv)  
 troth : clothe (lv)  
 caught : not (xlviii)

Finally, I group together, without classification, Rossetti's various rimes to *love*:

above : of : Love (i, viii)  
 Love : grove : of (ix)  
 love : of : enough (xv)  
 love : above : dove : of : prove : love (xxvi)

Love : above : glove (xxvii)  
move : love (xxviii)  
love : behoove : alcove : interwove (xxxii)  
dove : above : Love (xli)  
strove : Love : grove (xlv)  
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